Workplace Resistance in a Call Centre Environment

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Abstract

The growth and development of call centres in the UK has been one of the most significant economic trends to emerge following protracted de-industrialisation and the associated decline of the manufacturing base. In the period of this thesis for example (1999-2004), the call centre sector was the fastest growing industrial sector and employment within the industry is now considered to be macro-economically significant.

Call centres are characterised by the organisation of business activity conducted via the telephone, typically call centre employees are engaged in one-to-one telephone interactions with customers and are required either to make outgoing calls, thus contacting the customer to promote business, or receive incoming calls thus servicing customers.

The nature of call centre employment presupposes a high level of technical sophistication; call centres have been made possible by advances in technology that allow for the simultaneous integration of telephone and computer based systems. The necessity of the complex and integrated technological systems that make possible individual one-to-one telephone interactions also mean that surreptitious, and even, in most cases, overt surveillance of that interaction is possible.

In common with much service-based organisational activity, the one-to-one interaction between the worker and the customer forms the basis of production and hence the way in which business and ultimately profit is realised.

Significantly therefore, and possibly for the first time in the history of mass production, the call centre offers the opportunity to monitor every aspect of the production process. Previously for example the extensive scale of production meant that total managerial surveillance was not feasible, therefore managerial strategies such as 'quality control' were used as a surrogate, or proxy way of attaining, or attempting to attain, some degree of managerial control over the point of production.

The possibility of complete surveillance of the point of production has led some authors to argue that call centres amount to control made perfect and as a direct consequence, workers under such regimes are effectively denied the possibility to engage in acts of workplace resistance.

This thesis explores the possibility of worker resistance within a call centre environment. In order to understand and observe possible resistant practices in a naturally occurring and historically specific context an ethnographic research method is adopted. This involved the researcher gaining employment as a call centre worker for a period of 13 months, with the specific aim of investigating workplace resistance within the Call Centre. A detailed ethnographic account of the experience of being a call centre worker at the point of production forms a crucial part of this thesis.

In order to produce a fully theoretically informed account however, this ethnography is augmented with critical realism. Critical realism is a recent development in the philosophy of social research. It argues for a refocusing of attention onto ontological (that which exits) issues as opposed to epistemological (that which is known) concerns. In pursuit of this objective, critical realist research takes its starting point as empirical observation, but crucially makes explanatory claims on the basis of a movement from an empirical to a causal level which may be obscured from view in terms of initial empirical investigation. In making this movement (through a process of retroductive logic) critical realist research claims to render empirical investigation theoretically sensitive. Utilising the combination of ethnography and critical realism, it is argued that Braverman's deskilling thesis can be partially revived to provide an explanatory account of the historical development of call centres.

The ethnographic investigation reveals that opportunities for workers to engage in what we can think of a 'classical' forms of resistance were indeed effectively denied through structural control such as the deployment of surveillance technology, but significantly, also through cultural control which involved the subtle manipulation of workplace subjectivities, the deployment of competition between workers, company-based training programmes, team-working, career progression and social activities away from the point of production. Crucially it is found that these cultural factors

amount to the operation of an hegemonic ideology that pervaded call centre life and that effectively countered any capacity on behalf of call centre workers to engage in collective forms of resistance.

The thesis goes on to argue, however, that the use of the term 'resistance' has often been limited to the search for empirical examples of non-compliance and defiance. It is argued that resistance thus conceptualised is philosophically shallow. The thesis goes onto reconceptualise resistance as a process rather than an outcome, thus, through the theoretical resource of critical realism, presupposing a rich ontology of workplace relations which sensitises the ethnographer to the potential for the '*production of resistance practices*' which whilst falling short of overt defiance do continue to provide resources for divergent formations of worker identity within the call centre. Strategies of control cannot exert complete control over worker identity which opens up spaces of resistant practices manifest in the '*production of differential subjectivities'* which help to constitute what I term 'semi-resistance' and the maintenance, at least, of zones of non-productive activity.

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Mom, I miss you so much, this is for you.

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Introduction

Introduction

When I began research for this thesis in 1999, a spectre was haunting the British service sector – the spectre of the call centre. The growth of call centres in the UK economy had become a hot topic of debate and, in particular, the popular press appeared keen to chronicle the rise of call centres and their impact on contemporary society. A brief survey of the tabloid and broadsheet press from late 1999 identifies twin concerns. Firstly, expressing a customer-orientated concern, the effectiveness of call centre as a mode of service delivery was increasingly questioned. This concern echoed in other forms of popular culture with call centres being portrayed as frequently frustrating, and with interactions stereotypically taking place in the following format:

> *"If you require customer services press 1. If you require accounts press 2. If you require further information please stay on the line and one of our representatives will assist you"*

Secondly, an emerging theme of concern within the popular press focused upon the working conditions that call centre employees were forced to endure. Specifically the epithet of 'sweatshop' (Wazir, 1999) was often deployed to describe call centres.

On the 22nd November 1999, media coverage of call centre issues reached saturation point when staff in 44 British Telecom (BT) call centres across the United Kingdom staged a one-day strike in protest over working conditions. The action, organised by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), involved 4,000 call centre employees and, more significantly, was the first time BT had faced industrial action from its workers in 13 years. Whilst the impact of the strike upon BT and its customers was minimised through the deployment of non-Union staff and temporary employees to cover striking workers, the industrial action had both a much wider and deeper significance. The action by members of CWU represented the first recorded case of industrial action by call centre workers in the United Kingdom. The ready identification of this industrial action with issues over employment conditions fed into the already heightened, media-induced, public concern over employment practices within the industry. The case of the BT call centre workers received sympathetic

coverage within the press. A documentary analysis of press reports from November 1999 reveals the extensive use of pejorative language in relation to call centres with the press seemingly keen to portray call centres. '*the engine room of the post-industrial economy*' (Milne, 1999), as '*sweatshops*', and call centre workers as '*slaves*' (Hilpern, 1999).

The call centre revolution had certainly become high profile. Local bank closures, often as a result of the growth of call centre banking, became the focus of a five million pound advertising campaign by the National Westminister Bank in which a bank customer decried the close of her local branch by lamenting "*My bank's now a trendy wine bar*". The existing negative public perception of call centres made 'bad news' stories with respect to call centre employment practices even more resonant. The stereotypical call centre became a faceless, nameless organisation which employed workers unable to secure employment elsewhere. Call centre employment was perceived to be low paid, low skilled, highly authoritarian and extremely exploitative.

Against this background of general growing concern for call centre workers and industrial action came the first signs of a government response. The recently elected Labour government, traditionally sympathetic to those at the bottom-end of the employment spectrum, initially sought to be seen to offer protection against the worst excesses of the fastest growing industrial sector, which by 1999, recorded employee levels of almost 400,000 (Datamonitor, 1996). The growing importance of the call centre sector seemingly justified the government's enthusiasm to adopt a regulatory role. The then Cabinet Office Minister, Ian McCartney, introduced new guidelines for the employment of call centre workers in the public sector. McCartney argued Britain was in the grip of a new "*convenience culture*", and that it was the duty of Government to provide protection for workers employed in the new sweatshop economy. "*We are taking the issue of poor working standards by the neck here. Increasingly we are driving standards up, and these guidelines will help. There will be a significant change in culture, and in the public sector call centres won't be allowed to operate unless they do this.*" (Ian McCartney quoted in Abrams, 1999).

Having had previous, but limited experience of working in a call centre, I was

interested in the degree to which debates surrounding the conditions of call centre employment seemed to be played out in the media. Whilst much of the reporting traded upon sentiment, as indicated by the extensive use of imagery of 19th Century 'Dark Satanic Mills', some of the reports contained original journalistic contributions and reported accurately on the experience of employment in call centres. The general concern, or more accurately, the general frustration that customers often felt when forced to interact with call centres seemed, together with the reporting of conditions in call centres, to lead to far more social awareness of the issues that surround employment in call centres. Wide public concern for the experience of a group of workers is unusual and in this case was highly influenced by the 'newness' of call centres as a way of conducting business but also a media-induced fear of national economic decline.

Yet despite the appearance, and idealisation of call centres as a 'new' phenomenon, dissenting voices, such as the Guardian's Seamus Milne, had, even by 1999 started to trace the continuity of call centres with older, much more established forms of Labour management:

> '*Damned as the 'sweatshops of the 21st century', call centres are in reality the logical extension of the Fordist production methods of the early 1900s to the frontline of the emerging 24-hour service economy. They represent the apogee of the 'time and motion' theories of industrial management pioneered by Frederick Taylor 100 years ago*' (Milne, ibid).

The neat paradox which seemed to exist between 'new' and 'old' pervaded much of the discussion surrounding call centre issues; whilst employees were housed in purpose built industrial units, much of the Labour management strategies employed within the call centre industry were positively Fordist in the sense that they were established upon the principles of Scientific Management. Perhaps most significantly of all however, there was one aspect of call centre employment that was distinctly and undeniably modern; the capacity for 'complete' managerial surveillance. Presciently Milne, in his article, discussed the role of managerial surveillance in the Call Centre with academic Sue Fernie, who responded:

> *'The possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output in call centres is amazing to behold - the tyranny of the assembly line is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony'* (Milne ibid.),

An environment, which involved the total surveillance of the workplace, became synonymous with call centre employment, and fed into wider fears surrounding covert surveillance and privacy both in the public and private sphere. The technological sophistication that is a necessary condition for business to be conducted through the medium of a call centre is not only facilitative in that it allows for the rationalisation and condensation of business activity into a one-to-one telephone interaction, but it also permits the silent and surreptitious monitoring of the entirety of that interaction. The possibility of total surveillance of the workplace was and remains largely unprecedented in the history of mass industrial organisation.

It is the capacity for total surveillance of their employees that call centres offer that led to the formation of the basic research question upon which this thesis is founded. Having an interest in industrial relations, organisational behaviour and economics, I was aware of the rich history of studies into the conditions and experience of workers at the point of production (this term is defined more fully later in the thesis but ostensibly is used to mean the point at which productive activity takes place; moreover, it is used to invoke a general rather than specific view of productive activity). Further, and as elaborated in the literature review, by 1999 there had been little structured research into the specificity of call centre employment practices, the relative 'newness' of the industry meant that studies had yet to be properly established and although there was significant interest in the area, possibly encouraged by the growing media interest, data on the experience and conditions of call centre employment before 2000 remained scarce. The exception to this was research conducted by Fernie and Metcalf (1997). The contribution of this research to the wider literature is discussed more fully in the literature review, it is however, appropriate at this stage to identify that the major finding of this research is that the stylised call centre, through the application of integrated telephone and telephony systems, 'rendered perfect' managerial control (Fernie and Metcalf 1997). In the

broader context of increasing media, Trade Union and public concern for the working conditions of call centre employees, this finding seemed to confirm what had already been suspected; namely that call centres were indeed the new sweatshops. Conceptually, the construction of a working environment, which was necessarily established upon the foundation of 360-degree surveillance of employee activity, has a number of interesting possibilities. Firstly the capacity to monitor every aspect of productive activity meant that the capacity of workers to engage in non-productive activity is severely restricted. Secondly, the time and effort required to monitor all employees at all times, even with the assistance of a network of technical surveillance apparatus, would open up dilemmas for management control in terms of who is monitored, by whom and at what time. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly of all, the covert nature of electronic surveillance meant that employees will not be aware that they are being monitored. It has been argued that this leads employees to *believe* that they are being monitored all the time, thus resulting in employees acting *as if* they were being monitored all the time. This assumption became crucial to the work of Fernie and Metcalf.

Workplace resistance, as a form of misbehaviour at its most basic level, has been defined as '*counter-productive activity*' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, 24). The growth of call centres, characterised by total surveillance therefore offered the opportunity to explore empirically the possibility of workplace resistance under conditions of total managerial control. Whilst, despite the furore surrounding call centre employment it remains implausible that all workplace activity can be monitored directly, the capacity of the call centre to monitor any workplace activity, would it is suggested, mean that call centre employees essentially acquiesce to managerial authority. With prior experience of working in a call centre I was in an advantageous position to embark upon an exploration of the work experience of call centre employees and specifically to investigate the opportunities that existed for workers to engage in acts of workplace resistance. Simply stated, the research question "*the capacity of call centre workers to engage in acts of workplace resistance under conditions of total managerial surveillance*" was formulated. This thesis represents the outcome of that investigation.

The thesis is organised in the following way: firstly, it seeks to understand how the

workplace has been investigated historically. This discussion is informed by the 'Labour Process debate', which takes its origin from Marx's analysis of production under Capitalism. It is argued that the Labour Process debate remains the most effective framework for analysing contemporary employment practices, in terms of its analytical and conceptual resources. Subsequently, the thesis then turns to consider how resistance has been explored within the Labour Process literature; this is informative in two main ways. Firstly, it provides a benchmark for understanding how, previously, resistance has been empirically investigated. Secondly, it helps to develop a distinctive methodological approach in pursuit of the research question. Finally, the literature review and historical analysis draws upon the growing literature with specific reference to call centres. Notwithstanding the relative lack of call centre literature that was in evidence prior to 2000, the thesis seeks to chronicle the development of a growing literature on call centres, which became apparent in the period since 2000. This literature is informative as it contextualises the data produced from this investigation and, in some cases, has specific resonance to the research question as defined for this investigation.

Following on from, but developing out of, the literature review, the methodological discussion attempts to provide a robust justification of the approaches to data collection that were utilised within the study. It should be noted from the outset however that the researcher had previous experience of working in a call centre and the impact that this may have upon the research findings, and choice of investigative technique, may be significant. This issue is more fully explored in the methodological discussion. The technique of data collection mobilised in this study is primarily ethnography. The methodology section provides a review of the historical development of ethnographic investigation, and a detailed discussion into why ethnography is considered the most appropriate method of data collection in terms of the research questions that form the basis of this thesis. Ethnography involves the immersion of the researcher in the social world of the object of study; in this thesis therefore, ethnography involved the researcher working for a protracted period within a call centre. Significantly, however, it is argued that in order for ethnography to move beyond mere description, albeit, 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), ethnography itself needs to be developed. Specifically it is suggested that the analytical augmentation of ethnography to include elements of critical realism produces a

'theoretically informed' methodology for ethnography. Although critical realism has been used to analyse ethnographic data previously (see for example Delbridge, 1998 and Porter, 2000), it is suggested that the formal integration of critical realism and ethnography is a novel contribution to social scientific research, and the outcome of this thesis demonstrates the sustainability of this approach as an emerging analytical framework.

The findings of the investigation are then presented as an ethnographic account. This account is an ethnographic composite and draws upon observational research conducted whilst the researcher was working within the Call Centre. The researcher was able to maintain an electronic fieldwork journal whilst employed and observations were recorded whilst actively engaged in working activity. The electronic fieldwork journal is the main source of data presented in this thesis. The ethnographic account also draws upon data collected from follow-up interviews, which were conducted some time after the fieldwork had been completed. These interviews allowed for further precision to be added to the ethnographic account through the consultation of Call Centre staff. The development of analysis, concepts, theories and ideas were discussed with Call Centre employees and, in many respects, this thesis seeks to be the outcome of a dialogue between the researcher and the researched.

The findings section of this thesis draws on the data presented in the ethnography section of the thesis in the production of an analytically rich explanatory account of life within the Call Centre. Initially, drawing extensively upon the literature review, it is argued that the utilisation of a critical realist inspired methodology allows for a revitalisation of aspects of the Labour Process debate. Specifically it is suggested that the reconceptualisation of deskilling as a critical realist tendency provides the deskilling thesis (Braverman, 1974) with renewed explanatory power. Moreover it provides this thesis with a useful conceptual framework for analysing the growth and development of contemporary call centres and their place in modern Capitalism. Whilst this finding is significant, it is a by-product of the initial research question. In respect of the initial research question; the capacity of workers to engage in workplace resistance, the overwhelming findings that result from the investigation are that call centre environments and their inherently complex and sophisticated

surveillance technology do reduce opportunities for workers to engage in acts of workplace resistance. Significantly however, it is argued that the conception of resistance as counter or non-productive activity is too broad a category to be conceptually significant, and as such its analytical capacity becomes reduced. Further, it is argued that the conception of workplace resistance as merely non-productive activity encourages a philosophically shallow view of the workplace. Such a view is characterised as being contingent with an empiricist epistemology. Contra to such a reductionist position, the thesis then argues for a reconceptualisation of resistance from outcome to process, thus presupposing a far richer ontology of workplace relations.

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Literature Review and Historical Analysis

Literature Review and Historical Analysis

Introduction

Despite the contemporary nature of call centre work and the novelty of this type of organisational form, the systematic study of workplace relations has a long and distinguished history. The section aims to contextualise the research questions by locating their focus with an understanding of the historical development of the regulation of the employment relationship. In order to explore this fully, consideration is given to orthodox Marxist account of the regulation of the point of production. This analysis provides a grounding for further exploration of themes such as workplace control, alienation and resistance. The issue of workplace resistance has long been the subject of intense academic discussion, investigation and theorising. In presenting a review of the literature, the aim here is to provide a discussion of how issues of workplace resistance have been conceptualised and explored previously. Broadly, it is argued that the notion of resistance presupposes an employment relationship within the context of an industrial organisation. The discussion presented here seeks to provide an historical analysis of the growth and development of industrial organisations as these represent the vessels in which resistant activity is contained. The literature review and historical analysis presented here draws upon a wide range of subjects and subject areas and this reflects the way in which interest in issues of worker resistance can be directly traced to a number of disciplines including, but not exhausted by, Sociology, Management Science, Organisational Studies, Economics and Psychology.

The research question, namely the capacity of workers to engage in resistant practices in call centres which are characterised by total managerial surveillance, does not exclude a consideration of resistant practice located within a variety of organisational contexts; it will be demonstrated that much insight regarding the causes and consequences of worker resistance in call centres can be gained from a consideration of worker resistance drawn from a wider context. Furthermore the methodological approach adopted during the fieldwork stage of this research seeks to contest notions of 'expected', 'familiar' or 'ordinary' experience within the field, by replacing them with a concern to explore the 'unexpected', 'unfamiliar' and 'extraordinary'. Such an

empirical sensitivity is more effectively conditioned by a prior exploration of resistance from a wider and deeper perspective.

The literature review and historical analysis is however restricted to a broad consideration of resistance within organisations and this necessitates some degree of justification. An abstract concept of resistance is not conditional upon an associated notion of 'organisation'. The present concern however, derived from the initial research question, is not with an abstract notion of resistance *per se*, but rather with an historically located and materially specific form of resistant 'practice'. The identification and exploration of such a contextually located resistant practice invokes a notion of resistance within a discrete context and implicit within this, is a realisation that resistance presupposes the existence of a relationship. How can there be resistance if there is nothing to resist against? The act of resistance presupposes an 'other' that is resisted against. It is therefore necessary for an investigation of resistant practices to consider both the active practice of resistance and the organisational context, or 'other' within which it is located. An investigation of resistant practices, which is not contextualised with reference to the organisational backcloth, is therefore necessarily limited in its ability to locate the nature, causes and consequences of such resistant practices. Within the context of a call centre for example, resistant practices, as will be demonstrated, take many forms. Such practices are however specific to, and conditioned by, the material aspects of workplace life. Resistance cannot be merely considered as an abstract concept; the individuals or agents that constitute and reproduce the workplace require that enquiry into resistant practices within the workplace becomes not an esoteric exercise to uncover abstract categories but an attempt to articulate the social relations that condition, produce and reproduce the workplace. In seeking to understand, explore and explain resistance we are therefore understanding, exploring and explaining social relations within the context of the workplace. This therefore suggests a duality to the notion of resistance; firstly we may identify resistant practices as being concrete identifiable instances of individual or collective action that are directed against the organisation or the 'other'. Secondly, at a more abstract level, such concrete examples of resistant practice are part of an inherent feature of all Labouring activity, that is the capacity for Labour to be non-productive.

Finally the literature review seeks to explore the recent development of the call centre literature by placing this within the contact of the developing 'Labour Process Debate'. It is argued that an understanding of the concept and practice of workplace resistance has been central to this debate and the recent refocusing of attention towards worker's subjectivities effectively underlines this point. The literature review concludes with a consideration of methodological approaches to exploring workplace resistance apparent within the existing literature.

The Systematic Regulation of the Point of Production

The systematic regulation of the point of production within the context of an industrial or 'complex' organisation (Reed, 1992, 1) provides an historical starting point for attempts to understand the social relations that constitute and facilitate Capitalist production. Although the industrial organisation is now a familiar or even ubiquitous social formation, its ascendancy to such status is historically rooted. An attempt therefore to understand contemporary workplace social relations, as shaped by past organisational configurations, can only benefit from a consideration of the growth and development of industrial organisation and the impact that organisations have had. It has been argued that the modern organisation represents an essential feature of Modernity (Reed, ibid.) and that organisations have a symbiotic relationship with Western Civilisation. These claims clearly locate the organisation as not merely instrumental in the development of industrialisation, but significantly a key mediator of human progress.

The complexity of social relations within the workplace is, to some extent, reflected in the diversity and depth with which social relations within the workplace have been discussed within the literature. In presenting a literature review, a key aim of this work is to set out the significant aspects of the literature that will be used to critically inform the investigation of workplace relations within a contemporary call centre. As previously established, the starting point for the literature review is an attempt to understand the origins of the systematic study of organisations. It is argued that an appreciation of the historical specificity of industrial organisations is an essential prerequisite for an understanding of a contemporary workplace wherein social relations are mediated. The historical account presented provides justification for the

assumption that the workplace, as experienced by waged Labour, is not an end point but rather it is the reflection of the manifestation of a multitude of complex and historically specific transmutations of the employment relationship.

Faced with unprecedented economic changes it is perhaps not surprising that early writers trying to make sense of industrialisation should focus upon the industrial organisation as the key issue of concern. Whilst the term 'organisation' can be seen as a straightforward conceptual category, in reality, the heterogeneous nature of organisations means that generalisations about the causes and consequences of such entities may obscure more than they illuminate. (Nelson and Winter, cited in Thompson and McHugh, 2002, 6).

Prior to the Industrial Revolution and consequent urbanisation of the majority of the population, most work was carried out in or around the home. The domesticity of Labour reflected the subsistent characteristics of production. Labouring efforts were restricted to the supply of items that were required for the family unit to reproduce itself. Such an analysis should not be considered as an idealisation or romanticisation of the work experiences of traditional societies (Littler, 1982, 4), but merely to recognise the rupture and discontinuity that widespread participation in the factory system would bring. Familial work, particularly in Europe, tended to include a servile element with the overwhelming mass of the population being obliged to work on the land of a landlord in return for agricultural lettings and accommodation.

Social relations of production in pre-industrialised economies could therefore be most aptly characterised as subsistence production with some degree of interdependent hierarchical class relations exhibiting little or no division of Labour. The exception to this is to be found within the so-called 'Craft Guilds' where production was organised around a particular handicraft. The significance of the Craft Guilds, argues Thompson, is that they effectively demonstrated the '[lack] *of technical means of control*' (Thompson, 1983, 44) and, as a consequence, the growth of the factory system can be seen as an attempt to establish direct control over the Labour Process.

Industrialisation and the growth of the factory system led to the separation of home and work for the vast majority of society. The factory system was unique in the sense

that it constituted a spacio-temporal location that existed solely for the purpose of organising work. As well as economic advantages in terms of the division of Labour, economies of scale and more effective means of controlling the intensity of work, there were also direct advantages in terms of monitoring the workforce. The regulation of production under the factory system had profound social as well as economic consequences. Noon and Blyton (1997), for example, making reference to E.P. Thompson (1967) argue that '*time-discipline amongst the workforce represented a key feature in the development of an urbanised, industrial economy*' (Noon and Blyton, 1997, 57). Despite the concentration of effective means of control within the factory system the role of institutions such as school and the church with their '*emphasis on punctuality*' (Noon and Blyton, ibid., 57) reinforce a doctrine of uniformity and stability. Time discipline is further reinforced through the imposition of direct measures by factory controllers. Thus Pollard (op. cit. Noon and Blyton) finds that fines are imposed for lateness and factory gates are locked after the working day has commenced. The conditioning of social and personal behaviour by forces both external and internal to the point of production is apparent from an early stage.

However the process of industrialisation, with its distillation of production into industrial organisations, was neither a simple nor a smooth transition; often the emerging power of the industrial classes, buttressed by economic wealth, was to come into conflict with the existing power of the Craft Guilds. The source of Craft Guild power was legislative. The Statute of Artificers (1593) established a system under which various trades and crafts were allowed a body to represent their interests and to regulate the intake of Labour into the trade and the conditions under which its members worked. Integral to this was the seven-year apprenticeship scheme. Under this scheme the apprentice was legally bound to learn the trade under the supervision of the master. This led to the growth of powerful occupational interests, the Guilds, centred on each of the trades. Under this form of the apprenticeship system, skills were transferred over the seven-year period between master and apprentice. While it proved adequate under stable economic and social conditions, this system was eventually challenged by the emergence of new 'trades' in occupations associated with the new manufacturing industries which emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the UK this led to a distinction between the 'modern' trades based on industrial manufacture, and the traditional craft-based trades with their

origins under the medieval system. However for the purposes of training and skills transfer this distinction was largely irrelevant and the new trades, such as textiles and mining, were able to 'bind' young people to learn trades in the factories or mines under the rules of the old apprenticeship system. In some industries, such as textiles, new skills emerged such as those of the spinners, based around the new industrial technology. The distinction between craft and new trades and the growing appropriation of Labour into the factories meant that by the late eighteenth century there was considerable tension between the new occupations' embryonic Trades Unions, and the older craft trades. Eventually, as a result of pressure from the new industrial classes, the Statute of Artificers was repealed in 1914.

The first systematic attempt to explore the causes and consequences of industrial organisations was made by Marx in Volume One of *Capital* (1976). Marx was keen to move beyond a simple description of events or structures within a historically specific circuit of Capital and his efforts are distinguished by an attempt to locate relations of production, which were to be found within specific industrial organisations, within the much wider context of the overall mode of production. The aim was to demonstrate not only how the mode of production is conditioned by specific aspects of production, but also how specific aspects of production can condition the overall mode of production. Utilising a robust historical analysis Marx demonstrated how Capital and Labour produce and reproduce themselves. The specific configuration of this relationship is argued to be both historically and materially determined, hence production and the Labour process which gives rise to it exist independently of any '*specific social formation*' (Marx, ibid., 283). Nonetheless production is necessarily always a social activity because social individuals carry it out; analysis must therefore be conscious of the social context in which specific production takes place.

The 'Orthodox' Marxist Account

In linking specific social relations of production to the wider mode of production Marx emphasised the way in which relations of production are in no sense inevitable or concrete, rather they are a direct articulation of underlying structures of the mode of production at a given time. From this perspective relations of production are conceptualised as dynamic and malleable. This necessitates an historical exploration

of the changing nature of such relations over time; through such an analysis it is possible to explore both the existing relations of production and to reveal insights about the general mode of production. Moreover this suggests that the mode of production itself is neither permanent nor immobile, but rather it exhibits a transitional nature.

Marx identified work or Labour as central to human existence, and furthermore '*common to all forms of society in which human beings live*' (Marx, ibid., 290). Howard and King argue that '*History, as Marx conceives it, is a process of the continuous creation and satisfaction of men's needs through Labour*' (1975, 3). This in turn leads to the recognition of the 'dialectical nature' of the Labour Process. The onward progression of production ever-revolutionises conceptions of what is conceivable, hence Labouring activity changes the nature of humanity itself. Work, in any given situation, has a number of key components; firstly intentional human action, the presence of humanity within the work process is a prerequisite for Marxist accounts. Secondly, work entails objects upon which work is performed; these are usually conceived as raw materials. Finally, Marx suggests that work also involves instruments or tools of work, normally conceived of as technology. The basic composite elements of work are unaltered by human history. Throughout history work has always been characterised as containing these three elements and although their specific form may change, such as through technological developments, their natures remain constant. Of primary concern in this account is the realisation that work is orchestrated though human intentional activity thus '*at the end of every Labour Process, a result emerges which had already been conceived of by the worker at the beginning*' (Marx, ibid., 284). The centrality of intentional human activity to the Labour process means that the exploration of the human aspect of production is therefore non-optional. The combination of human intentional activity, raw materials and technology results in the production of what Marx termed 'use values'. As the term suggests, use values represent the creation of material for the satisfaction of human needs and desires. Marx argued that the production of use values for consumption by their producers was a key characteristic of modes of production prior to the ascendancy of Capitalism.

Marx's analysis of the nature of production under Capitalism has significant insights for the way in which work is conceptualised as both an historical and social process. However the analysis, as presented so far, has little to say about the way in which Labour is actually organised under Capitalism. The context of Marx's writings, nineteenth Century Europe, was rapidly being transformed by processes of industrialisation. Marx identified industrialisation as a characteristic feature of the specific mode of production termed Capitalism. For Marx, the essential feature of Capitalism and the aspect that distinguishes it from all other earlier modes of production was the systematic attempt to profit from the production of exchange values. Whilst recognising the innate use value of commodities produced under Capitalism, Marx suggests that these commodities exhibit a dual character, embodying both exchange and use value simultaneously. Significantly however, under Capitalism, the gains to be made from production are no longer the province of those directly engaged in production, as in previous modes of production, but have now become the property of the Capitalist. The arrangement is negotiated prior to production and is established within the terms of the employment contract.

In search of profit Capital must establish control over the prerequisites for production: Labour power, raw materials and technology. The acquisition of Labour is facilitated through the Labour market and the bearers of Labour power are commodified though the operation of the market where a worker can be hired for a given rate for a given amount of time. Thus the universal category of Labour power therefore becomes relegated to the status of a mere commodity. The bearer of Labour power, in return for Labouring activity, is paid a wage, but like the seller of any commodity, the seller of Labour power realises Labour's exchange value but alienates its use value. The bearer of Labour power therefore foregoes the claim to the final results of its own Labour power. The conclusion of the wage negotiation in an employment contract implies that the production that is created as a result of working activity remains the property of the Capitalist. For Marx the Labour Process under Capitalist societies is characterised by the consumption of Labour power. This has two broad implications. Firstly, as outlined above, the purchase of Labour power renders the products of the Labour process the property of Capital. As a direct consequence, Capital now has vested interest in ensuring the highest degree of Labouring productivity possible. Secondly, the succession of Capital to the fruits of production provides Capital with

the province to arrange productive activity as most befits the pursuit of Capital's objectives. Herein lies the origin of all attempts to understand specific configurations of Capitalist production.

For Marx, production under a Capitalist mode of production becomes driven by the pursuit of profit through the realisation of exchange values. Once in a position to begin production the Capitalist is then free to establish the way in which production is organised in order to secure the greatest amount of profit. This however, for the Capitalist is not a final outcome. Once production has been concluded the Capitalist must then realise the exchange value inherent within the commodity in the pursuit of profit. This is achieved via the sale of the fruits of production through the market mechanism. The realisation of profitable production lies in securing an exchange price for the commodity that is in excess of the total costs associated with production. This process is inherently exploitative. The drive to realise profit from production imbues Capital with an instrumental disposition towards Labour. Labour is seen not as creative, nor is it desired for its capacity to work as end in itself, but rather, it is a means of creating value. Recognising the historical role of Labour in producing use values, Capital is attuned to the possibility of realising profit through the sale of exchange values at a cost that is greater than the total costs involved in the production. From this analysis Thompson (1983) notes a fundamental observation in terms of the study of workplace social relations: '

> *'the process of production must therefore combine the Labour process with the creation of value. Hence the Labour process becomes inextricably linked to the struggle for profitable production*' (Thompson, 1983,41).

For Marx the 'struggle for profitable production' is vastly intensified under Capitalist relations of production. Under such conditions the means of production are concentrated as the private property of Capital. This property is vastly fragmented into heterogeneous 'Capitals' that compete against each other for greater levels of profit. The competitive nature of Capital in the pursuit of profit results in a desire to extract as much value as possible from Labour in the production process so that this can be realised through the sale of commodities. Production of value over and above that which is sufficient to cover the costs of the productive process is deemed to be

'surplus value' and collectively known as a process of 'valorisation'. The argument can thus be summarised that processes of production involve the creation of value, and significantly, the amount of value created directly reflects the human intentional activity that is embodied within the production process. The degree to which the interests of Capital are served in terms of the pursuit of profit is therefore directly determined by the amount of value that is created in the Labour process. Marx used the term 'valorisation' to indicate the process of creating surplus value, meaning the value that is over and above that which is needed to cover the costs of production. The creation of this surplus value is a manifestation of a Capitalist mode of production.

Marx, in identifying processes of valorisation, describes the internal motor that drives Capitalism forward; the motive for all business decisions now finds a root within the desire to maximise the valorisation process. The intense competition manifest between different Capitals for the appropriation of surplus value compels Capital to subsume the interests of Labour; the domination of Capital and the consequent subordination of Labour is a key characteristic of Capitalistic relations of production. The 'formal subordination of Labour' indicates both the domination of Capital over the interests of Labour and the recognition of the alienating character of production under a Capitalist mode of production. The exchange of Labouring power for a wage rate within the Labour market provides an outward appearance both seemingly neutral and equal. It is however not merely a sophisticated level of analysis that is able to grasp the fundamental asymmetry involved in an exchange which is predicated upon the sale of Labour power given the expropriation of the mass of the population from the ownership and control of the means of production. In this context Marx analyses Class as '*social strata that are 'grouped' as a result of the relationship they have to the possession of the means of production as private property.*' (Howard and King, ibid., 6)

Control, Alienation and the rise of Resistance

Locating the organisation of productive activity directly within the sphere of influence of the interests of Capital results in a recognition of the direct link between specific workplace social relations and the way in which these are conditioned by the

underlying mode of production. Moreover given the exploitative nature of production under Capitalism, social relations between Capital and Labour are necessarily characterised by mutual antagonism. The irreconcilable nature of relations at the point of production has corrosive consequences and nowhere is this more eloquently elaborated than in Marx's discussion of the 'real subordination of Labour';

> '*with the real subsumption of Labour under Capital a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place, in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and the relations between workers and Capitalist*' (Marx, ibid., 1035).

The concept of the real subordination of Labour articulates the desire that Capital has to constantly revolutionise methods of production in search of greater levels of surplus value. With this statement Marx effectively establishes the fundamental concern that has occupied management writers, thinkers and academics for much of the post-Second World War period. Much managerial literature is directly concerned with uncovering the specific configurations of workplace relations that saturate to the highest degree the amount of surplus value created within the production process. This is typified by the Business Process Reengineering literature (Hammer and Champy, 1994), which can be understood as an attempt to articulate the necessary conditions and relations within the workplace to realise profitable production. Still ahead of the game however, Marx dismisses the vulgar pursuit of profit and maintains an absolute focus upon the link between specific social relations within the workplace and the way in which this penetrates and is penetrated by the overall mode of production.

Both the formal and real subsumption of Labour result in the constant revolutionising of the Labour process. In search for ever greater levels of surplus value Capital is compelled to alter the organisation of production, no aspect of existing relations is sacred, working times are increased, the overall level of activity is intensified and the number of tasks is decreased, standardised, then increased and diversified. The history of industrial organisation demonstrates the flexibility inherent within the production process, the multitude of configurations possible and the degree to which all avenues are pursued in the search for profit. Marx is however well aware of the caustic effects

of this revolutionising of production upon Labour power, and how, in the manner of a sleight of hand, the relations that bind Labour to the productive process are obscured:

> '*Even if we consider just the formal relations, the general form of Capitalist production, which is common to both its more and its less advanced forms, we see that the means of production, the material conditions of Labour, are not subject to the worker, but he to them. Capital employs Labour. This in itself exhibits the relations in its simple form and entails the personification of things and the reification of persons'* (Marx, ibid., 1054)

The opacity of social relations in and around the point of production effectively constitutes the '*Mystification of Capital'* (Marx, ibid., 1052). As a consequence, the agency of Labour is denied and significantly Labour power is '*Capitalized*' (Marx, ibid., 1054) confronting Labour, not as part of itself or yielding to its own will, but as a form of Capital, independent and autonomous. Wage Labour increasingly therefore experiences its own activity as a process of growing estrangement and alienation. The alienating character of the Labour process is a key feature of production under Capitalism.

From the preceding analysis, following Marx, it is clear that Labour exists within a relationship with Capital. Whilst Capital is free to dictate the way in which production is organised, the constant search for greater levels of surplus value compels within Capital a pathological desire to revolutionise the way in which production is organised and structured. The effect of such changes within the workplace effectively conceals and mystifies existing social relations. A further consequence is manifest in the growing experience of alienation within the workplace and of wage Labour in general. The origin of alienation then, in its most general form, exists as the estrangement of Labour from its own creative power. Denied autonomy over the Labour process through the operation of both the formal and real subordination of Labour, Labour power itself perversely confronts Labour as unfamiliar and alien, firmly locating alienation as inherent within Capitalist relations of production. Within the context of an investigation into workplace resistance within a call centre we can therefore expect the alienation of Labour to be a significant

feature of this specific workplace. As a consequence of Labouring activity under a distinctly Capitalist mode of production, the presence of alienation should not surprise. Yet empirically, the lack of surprise due to our familiarity with the concept and appearance of alienated Labour, may signify a key form of structural weakness with the overall aims of the investigation. The ubiquity of all alienated Labouring activity and the general familiarity of alienated Labour processes presents a clear danger that the investigation will fail to highlight aspects of the call centre Labour process that are of concern. More damagingly, the empirical study of work processes that are manifestly alienating may even be 'normalised' with the effect that processes and consequences of the social relations within the workplace are interpreted as either permanent, fixed or irresistible. The awareness of this danger is merely noted for now but will be addressed more fully within the methodology section.

The heterogeneity of Labour confronts Capital as a problem that requires the close management of the Labour process; this was recognised by Marx and is rendered explicit in the use of the term 'variable' in relation to Labouring activity. The notion of variability suggests indeterminacy to the Labour process and hence partially reveals the need for the direct supervision of Labouring activity. Recognising the ability of Capitalism to grow and evolve Marx foresaw the development of a managerial class for whom '*the work of supervision becomes their established and exclusive function*' (Marx, ibid., 450) and who are of course agents of Capital. With reference to the present investigation, the conceptualisation of the indeterminacy of Labour establishes the need to be aware of the particular form that managerial strategies may take within the workplace. This concern is well represented within the Labour process literature and this will be discussed more fully later. Perhaps more significantly, however, control is now located firmly at the centre of attempts to understand the changing form of not only social relations within the workplace but also the specific mode of production itself. Furthermore the presence of a managerial class is portrayed as existing in direct opposition to the interests of Labour. Acting on behalf of Capital the managerial class is clearly the developer of strategies designed to enhance the productive output of the Labour process. Marx thus argues:

> '*The driving motive and determining purpose of Capitalist production is the self-valorization of Capital to the greatest possible extent, i.e. the*

greatest possible production of surplus value, hence the greatest possible exploitation of Labour-power by the Capitalist. As the number of co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of Capital, and, necessarily the pressure put on Capital to overcome this resistance. The control exercised by the Capitalist is not only a special function arising from the nature of the social Labour process, and peculiar to that process, but it is at the same time a function of the exploitation of a social Labour process, and is consequently conditioned by the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the raw material of his [sic] exploitation'. (Marx, ibid., 449)

This demonstrates that in Marx's thinking the capacity for and presence of resistant activity in any given situation is not merely conditional upon human intentional agency in the form of overt resistance, but rather is dialectically manifest in any situation that is characterised as 'exploitative' through the subordination of Labour power in its manifest forms.

In summary then a consideration of the Orthodox Marxist account provides much insight into an exploration of workplace resistance within a call centre environment. It has been argued that the presence of resistant practice presupposes a social relationship between Capital and Labour. Following Marx the preceding discussion has argued that this relationship both conditions and is conditioned by the overall mode of production insofar as, under Capitalism, valorisation is the central motivating dynamic. In pursuit of surplus value Labour is subject to both a formal and real subordination and is closely controlled to overcome the problems associated with the indeterminacy of Labour. The exploitative nature of the process of subordinating Labour and exerting control both generates resistance and alienates Labour power.

The Drift Away from Labour Process Theory

A brief examination of the basic or orthodox Marxist account of the Labour process has therefore bequeathed a theoretical benchmark for a consideration and exploration of workplace resistance in call centres. Resistance is conceptualised as both an abstract and concrete category being located in relation to exploitative production

relations. A consideration of the issues of alienation, control and resistance originates, following Marx, from the exploration of the Labour process; it is however significant to note that the influence of this theoretically informed approach has not been uniform. Indeed Thompson argues that even within Marxist theory '*analysis inexorably drifted away from a concern with the Labour process*' (Thompson, 1983, 58). Given this apparent inconsistency then it becomes necessary to provide a review of the contours of influence that Labour process theory has exhibited within the literature.

Brown (1992) in an authoritative introduction to 'Sociologists and Industry' notes that systematic and sustained attempts to understand social relations within the workplace were not apparent before the Second World War. In evaluating this claim it is important to acknowledge that Brown is seemingly constraining his analysis to a consideration of a narrow academic interest, as such he acknowledges the '*significant tradition of research on psychology and social problems within industry'* (Brown, 1992, 3). Such a claim however is severely weakened by its narrow focus upon academic areas of concern. Thompson, for example, notes a number of studies which, whilst focusing upon the role of trades unions, provide a valuable insight into the social relations of the workplace prior to 1945 (see, for example, Goodrich in Thompson, 1983, 59). Brown's analysis is however not without merit; his concern to link developments within the '*sub-disciplines of sociology*' to the wider institutional context (Brown, ibid., 5) reinforces the role that contract research has within the development of specific 'subject' knowledge. Brown argues persuasively that a lack of funding, organisational access and institutional base all combined to effectively limit the scope and contribution of research prior to the expansion of Higher Education in the UK in the 1960s.

Both Brown (1992) and Thompson (1983) do concur about the importance of the various 'plant' studies as typified by Mayo's (1945) investigation into worker productivity at Western Electric in Chicago. Brown cites the desire for and subsequent investigation into increased munitions production, culminating with the establishment of the Munitions Works Committee (1915) as a direct precursor to Mayo's Hawthorn experiments. As a result Brown argues that 'plant' sociology increasingly gained an ascendancy over other forms of industrial sociology. This

resulted in an understanding of workplace social relations that can be explained and changed 'within' the workplace. Correspondingly, contra Marx, a commitment to understanding the impact of the wider mode of production and the way in which this both conditions and is conditioned by workplace social relations is jettisoned. In short, explanation from within this context is exhausted by the specificities of the workplace in direct conflict with the Marxist account outlined earlier, which sought to locate social relations of production within the wider context of a specific historical mode of production. Whilst the ascendancy of 'plant' sociologies is an interesting historical development in itself, their appearance in the context of the growing adoption of the principles of 'Scientific Management' is more than purely coincidental. The 'plant' sociologies, amongst them the Hawthorne Experiments, must therefore be seen as a measured response to some of the perceived problems with Scientific Management.

Scientific Management

The publication in 1911 of 'Principles of Scientific Management' by F. W. Taylor established, not only the first systematic attempt to codify a 'theory of management', but also represented a growing trend towards the rationalisation and increasingly pseudo-scientific way in which the role of management was being conceptualised within the modern industrial organisation. With a background as a highly regarded skilled manual Labourer (Burnes, 2000, 34) Taylor had risen to hold the position of Chief Engineer and became focused upon the task of achieving efficiency within the productive process. As a managerial agent of Capital, Taylor excelled in terms of effecting efficiency gains and this was achieved through the application of a rudimentary scientific methodology. Highly critical of modern management's *'idiosyncratic'* and *'arbitrary'* (Burnes, ibid., 35) nature, Taylor advocated the adoption of strict rules and procedures for the organisation of productive activity and this ultimately was believed to lead to the uncovering of a 'one best way' approach. The extreme rationalism of Scientific Management was predicated upon two fundamental assumptions. Firstly, the application of systematic observation of any job task would yield the best way of carrying out the specific task. Secondly, Labour power is compelled to seek the greatest reward for the minimum effort. Policy prescription following these assumptions included the establishment of performance

criteria and the detailed analysis for and of specific tasks. The implementation of Scientific Management started with the collection of detailed knowledge relating to the tasks involved within the productive process. Traditionally the in-depth knowledge of the specific and nuanced details of production remained the preserve of Labour. Taylorism rejected the sanctity of Labour's claim to a monopoly over this knowledge and sought to reclaim this in the interests of Capital. Once this knowledge is successfully appropriated by managers the tasks of production are effectively demystified and hence become, once again, an instrument for the achievement of Capital's goals. The formal subordination of Labour via the employment contract means that once this knowledge is concentrated within the hands of the manager, as the agent of Capital, the manager is then endowed with the ability to change the way in which tasks are organised in search of efficient production. Hence in Taylor's prescription, the manager becomes an active agent of the real subordination of Labour. Significantly, total mastery of Capital over Labour within Taylor's schema is however realised only when all traces of autonomous decision-making are removed from the grasp of Labour:

> '*Perhaps the most prominent single element in modern Scientific Management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by management ... and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, detailing the task which he [sic] is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work. This task specifies not only what is to be done but also how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it'*. (Taylor, cited in Burnes, 2000, 36)

In light of the previous discussion of the orthodox Marxist account it is interesting to note that many aspects of Taylorism can be seen as a practical methodology for overcoming the eternal problem of the indeterminacy of Labour.

The need for, and subsequent development of Scientific Management can be seen as arising for three reasons. Firstly, the managerial class lacked the knowledge to organise production in an effective and efficient way. Taylor located 'soldiering' as an endemic problem within the productive process at that time. Soldiering involved workers deliberately lowering productive effort - a clear form of workplace

resistance. Taylor argued that this was part of the 'Human Condition'. Contra Marx, Taylor argued that it was the workers who were the relative experts on the production process, and despite the hierarchical nature of the employment contract, the asymmetry of knowledge resulted in a loss of control over the physical way in which work was organised on the shop floor. Secondly, Taylor identified that the workers appeared to be motivated to restrict production because of the fear of underpayment or redundancy. Lastly, crude payment structures needed to be replaced by systems of payment that were more accurately able to relate payment to work effort. This was facilitated by Scientific Management's capacity to accurately measure the nature of work. In order to overcome these problems, Taylor suggested that each task should be fragmented into its smallest constituents which could then be measured. A piece-rate system, which was arranged around the individual, was significant and involved reward for good performance and punishment for poor performance.

The degree to which Taylorism was accepted as a universal solution to the problems of industrial organisation is somewhat debatable. Rose, for example, suggested that uptake in Europe was strictly limited and met with scepticism from managers and hostility from workers (Cited in Burnes, 2000, 38). Yet, as a conceptual tool, Taylorism remains a fundamental benchmark against which industrial process are judged. It may therefore be 'Taylorism: the myth' rather than 'Taylorism: the reality' against which modern industrial organisations are judged.

Within this context the growth of 'plant' sociologies associated with the Human Relations movement can be interpreted as a rebuttal of the extreme rationalistic approach adopted by Taylorism. The philosophical position of the Human Relations movement was also vastly different to that of Taylorism, seeing organisations as complex social systems; attention was shifted onto the informal aspects of organisational life. This was complemented with a view of organisational agents as having emotional as well as economic needs. The lack of a formal theoretical framework, manifest in the absence of clear policy prescriptions, resulted in an inability to move beyond a specific organisational context and to draw adequate generalisations. The 'job enlargement' and 'job enrichment' movements which focused upon combining fragmented tasks and increasing workers' control over the production process have not proved enduring. Indeed it is arguable that these

strategies can be seen as direct responses to high rates of Labour turnover, absenteeism and industrial action, which characterised the industrial landscape of the 1970s.

Braverman

The initiation of critical investigation of the sphere of the workplace is generally credited to the seminal work of Harry Braverman. Braverman's '*Labour and Monopoly Capital*', published in 1974, is often cited as the inspiration behind many Marxist accounts of the Capitalist Labour Process. Braverman enhanced a growing corpus of work, which devoted attention to understanding various facets of Capitalist development, in particular the work of Sweezy (1942) and Baran and Sweezy (1966) and contributed to a critique of bourgeois economics and related developments in the field of macroeconomics with a considered analysis of developments of the Labour process, or the spatial-temporal location where Labour and raw materials are brought together with the purpose of creating commodities, which includes services. Following the Marxist analysis of alienated production, Braverman argued that work, under advanced Capitalism, had entered a period of rapid 'degradation'. Moreover that the transformation of work had been conditioned by the logic of advanced Capitalism, it is argued that under an advanced Capitalist mode of production the intense competition between Capitals to secure ever-larger amounts of surplus value compels Capital to revolutionise the way in which production is organised (Smith and Thompson, 1998). Braverman, using the incessant transformation of the point of production as his departure point, was able to demonstrate how such a dynamic was consistent with the logic of Capitalist development (Spencer, 2000). Furthermore Braverman demonstrates that such changes at the point of production were carefully ordered and predicated upon the process of valorisation. As Cohen suggests: "*Braverman's primary concern is not with 'control' or even 'deskilling' per se, but with the specifically Capitalist logic which constructs these tendencies*". (Cohen, 1987, 36 emphasis original).

While Braverman's contribution dealt with the social arrangements that accompany the process of commodity creation, Marx in Capital begins his analysis with the category of the commodity. Work and the creation of commodities are, for Marx, as

discussed previously, the defining characteristics of Capitalism. Furthermore, the moment when work becomes sophisticated enough to produce a surplus over and above a subsistence level marks the initiation of the historic confrontation as to who appropriates this surplus. Building upon the account of alienation as derived from Volume 1 of Capital (discussed in the previous section) Braverman makes reference to the early writings of Marx (1970, 1975) to discuss the effect and causes of alienation in the workplace from a broader perspective. From an analysis of his early writing it is clear that for Marx, the dual character of alienation arises because, not only are individuals unable to express themselves through their work, but also, despite the fact that work is ostensibly a social activity, the potential for social inter-connectedness is effectively denied, due to the dehumanising consequences of the Capitalist Labour process, which can be considered as the manifestation of the formal and real subordination of Labour. While alienation is clearly an important aspect of the post-Braverman Labour process debate, it has, for some authors, subsumed the central role of '*valorisation*' as *the* dynamic of the Labour process (Spencer, 2000, Cohen, 1987).

Whilst Braverman's work did not explicitly deal with the notion of alienation, it was concerned with broad trends in job design and how this relates to the general development of advanced or monopoly Capitalism. Braverman identified a key problem for Capital as being the extraction of maximum effort from the workforce in return for minimum reward, consistent with the process of valorisation. The solution to this problem, as discussed previously, has been stylised in the development and adoption of the principles of Scientific Management as outlined above. The extension of the division of Labour, and the consequent separation of conception and execution became a key strategy in the arsenal of managerial Capitalism. The significance of Scientific Management lies in an explicit attempt to reduce the amount of individual discretion, autonomy and control that Labour could exercise over the production process. The key to doing this successfully was, as suggested above, through an extension of the division of Labour. Therefore, the redesign of work along Taylorist principles led to a widespread tendency towards work which was stripped of its autonomous or spontaneous character and which was replaced by work that was repetitive, monotonous and highly controlled. In a historical context craftwork was replaced by factory work.

Braverman further asserted that deskilling has also occurred in white-collar occupations (Braverman, 1974, 326); indeed professions such as solicitors, accountants and managers have also been included in the deskilling debate. It is significant to note that whilst Braverman's thesis is instantly associated with manufacturing activity such as a vehicle production line, the service sector provides some sound evidence of its effects. The introduction of technology has enabled organisations in banking and finance to deskill jobs into tasks, which are both routine and standardised. This has allowed the banking industry to replace skilled workers with less skilled Labour, facilitated by technology.

Whilst the work of Braverman was initially welcomed, the history of the post-Braverman Labour process debate can be seen as a systematic attempt to relegate to the periphery the deskilling thesis as a conceptual framework for understanding the contemporary nature of work organisation. In some respects this mirrors the drift within Marxist theory away from the Labour Process debate (Thompson, 1983). Beyond empirical refutation, the deskilling thesis has also been barraged by a number of significant philosophical criticisms. For example, it has been argued that the general acceptance of the deskilling thesis is heavily reliant upon the degree to which principles of Scientific Management were widely adopted, or even their capacity to form an effective managerial strategy (Wood and Kelly, in Wood ed., 1982). As outlined above, evidence for the assumed universal adoption of Scientific Management remains ambiguous and movements in the design of jobs such as 'enrichment' and 'enlargement', even at a superficial level, seem to challenge the universality of processes of deskilling. Furthermore, despite an overtly Marxist orientation, Braverman's analysis chronically and systematically underestimates the agency of Labour within '*Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*'. The general lack of consideration that Braverman gives to the capacity and potential for workers to resist processes of deskilling (Penn, cited in Wood ed., 1982) fundamentally weakens the deskilling thesis. By not considering the extent and potential of Labour power to actively confront perceived detrimental trends in organisational arrangements, Braverman effectively fetishises a key aspect of the Labour process. Whilst this is certainly an empirical failing, it has been argued that '[through] *collective control the workers managed to preserve both their skilled status and their wage differentials*'

(Penn, 1982, 90). This is also manifestly philosophical in the sense that deskilling within '*Labour and Monopoly Capitalism'* is elevated to an irresistible force.

Control?

Braverman clearly articulates the centrality of the issue of control over the Labour process and the degree to which processes of deskilling effectively constitutes control. From the preceding analysis however it is clear that control, within the context of the Labour process, is not merely an end in itself. More significantly and in conceptual terms, as far as Capital is concerned, control is the solution to the problem of variable Labour. The focus on control in the deskilling thesis should therefore not be mistaken as a pursuit for its own sake (Spencer 2000, Cohen 1987). Whilst control may constitute a core aspect of Labour process theory, the empirical consideration of '*how control is acquired and maintained*' (Thompson, 1983, 123 emphasis original) is dealt with in a number of contrasting ways. The conceptualisation of control can, following P. K. Edwards, be usefully bifurcated into elements of 'detailed' and 'general' control. Detailed control refers to the 'immediate work process' (Edwards, 1990, 143). Detailed control is conceived of as being matters of fact, or the minutiae of workplace life. Within the Call Centre, for example, the monitoring of worker performance is routine; the criteria against which performance is compared are however established in terms of a dialogue between management and the Call Centre workforce. The performance standard is therefore an aspect of detailed control. Aspects of detailed control can be contested. For example, a specific job within the Call Centre might become more difficult and hence the amount of time required to complete the job satisfactorily may then increase. The workforce, recognising the increasing demands of the job, may then respond by seeking to renegotiate the performance standard. Edwards draws attention to both formal and informal aspects of detailed control. The conceptualisation of detailed control is extended further to include a notion of a 'frontier of control' (Edwards, 1990, 143 and Goodrich, 1975 cited in Thompson and McHugh, 2002, 104). The frontier of control suggests a summation of all individual details of control to effectively establish, with respect to the workplace, the line that exists between Labour and Management. General control, in contrast, is conceptualised as the resulting effect of the formal subordination of Labour. General control is not dependent upon any specific aspect of detailed

control and is primarily established through the operation of the Labour market. The sale of Labour as a commodity cedes general control to Capital. The conceptualisation of detailed and general control is useful as it enables analysis of specific forms of control and renders intelligible the heterogeneity of control relationships within modern workplaces, whilst remaining in an overall mode of production that is characterised by domination, control and subordination.

The location of a nexus of control relations within the wider mode of production has been attempted by Richard Edwards in his book '*Contested Terrain*' (1979). Identifying control as having a symbiotic relationship with Capitalism, Edwards is able to infer the development of structures of control that mirror both social conditions and also worker resistance (Thompson and McHugh 2002:106). Whereas Braverman suggests that the growth of management control through the process of deskilling was driven by the need for greater amounts of surplus value, Edwards offers a more subtle analysis in which the dominant mode of control is directly conditioned by the response of workers to previous modes of control. Under 'simple' Capitalism, for example, simple modes of direct control dominate, where Capital takes on a direct supervisory role. This method of direct control presupposes a workforce that is small and under the direct surveillance of Capital, thus significantly reducing the risk of aberrant worker behaviour. The growth of managerial Capitalism, with its associated separation of ownership and control, and the development of professional managerial classes effectively increase the opportunity for recalcitrant behaviour of the workforce, as simple and direct control methods start to lose their effectiveness. In response to the 'contradictions' (Thompson 1983, 125) of simple control more elaborate and sophisticated modes of control are developed which depend less on the ability, skill or coerciveness of particular individuals, but rather are facilitated by the structural architecture of the Labour process. In terms of 'technical control' for example the intensity and nature of the work task is dictated by the physical configuration of the site of the production process. The exemplar of technical control is typified in the manufacture of motor-cars on an assembly line. However, as with all modes of control, technical control faces its own internal contradictions. The vehicle production line provides a real physical link between Labourers working on the shop floor. The link results in the shared experience of the realities of workplace life. If the line slows or quickens the entire workforce feel its

effects. The cumulative effect, argues Edwards, is industrial conflict and widespread belligerence. The incongruity of the effects of technical control with its initial objectives results, Edwards argues, in the development of 'bureaucratic control' (Edwards, 1979, 21) which attempts to stifle worker resistance with impersonally generated rules and regulations, replacing the individual authority and corresponding resentment with communal responsibility, targets and goals. In evaluating the contribution of Edwards, Littler draws a distinction between the linear and non-linear aspects of Edwards' work (Littler in Knights and Willmott, 1990, 61). The articulation of a movement from simple to technical to bureaucratic forms of control is seen as reflecting '*the increasing size of organisations and the changing nature of inter-Capitalist competition'* (Littler, ibid, 60). This overtly linear account has, Littler suggests, received criticism for its over-determinacy and abstract exploration. However Littler identifies a distinctively non-linear strand in Edwards' writing which locates various segmented Labour markets which display a variety of dominant controlling modes. Thus Edwards' '*conceptualisations can be used to provide a typology of control structures and management strategies*' (Littler, ibid, 61). This clearly resonates with the typology of general and detailed control developed by P.K. Edwards, as discussed above. The theme of internal contradiction within control systems is amplified in the work of Friedman (Friedman, 1977). Contra Braverman, Friedman asserts the possibility of alternative managerial strategies in pursuit of organisational objectives, thus developing the dual typology of 'direct control' and 'responsible autonomy'. Direct control, as the name suggests, is characterised by systematic and direct regulation of production. Responsible autonomy, in contrast, is conceptualised as the granting of limited autonomy to Labour in the performance of work in accordance with managerial objectives. Endemic to both strategies however are internal contradictions: the juxtaposition of the impossibility of total surveillance against the need for close supervision in the case of direct control and the incongruity of attempts to co-opt worker compliance into a process which is inherently exploitative, as in the case of responsible autonomy.

In summary, Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* firmly re-establishes a Marxist analysis of the social relations at the point of production on the intellectual and academic agenda following the colonisation by 'plant' sociology and early management thinking. Reasserting basic Marxist concepts such as the Labour

process, control, resistance and alienation, Braverman can be seen as providing a historically specific, and hence empirically relevant, account of the operation of both formal and real subordination of Labour. Recoupling existing interest in workplace relations to fundamental Marxist categories of analysis greatly revitalises interest in this area and the response to Braverman, empirically, theoretically and philosophically is notable. Of particular interest to this study is the re-establishment of the issue of workplace control at the centre of studies into workplace relations. Braverman, P.K. Edwards, Friedman and Edwards all locate control as central to attempts to realise profitable production. Significantly, these authors also locate within specific nodes of control some level of inherent tension or even contradiction which reflect the irreconcilable push and pull forces of the interest of Capital viz Labour. Several of the authors, such as Edwards and P.K. Edwards, can be interpreted as developing typologies of control that can be useful when exploring specific social relations at the point of production. However, following Marx, materially specific changes in the control relations at the point of production necessarily have to be articulated with specific reference to the overall mode of production. Attempts to achieve this feat by both P.K. Edwards and Edwards have been heavily criticised.

Despite these criticisms it should not be suggested that a consideration of these contributions to the debate is not valuable. With specific reference to the workplace resistance within a call centre environment, Braverman draws attention to the way in which broad trends in organisational design can be interpreted as being a specific articulation of attempts within Capitalism to resolve internal contradictions. For example, Braverman provides a detailed discussion of how the level of autonomy and individual discretion within the printing industry has reduced over time. Furthermore, this trend, it is argued, is part of a much wider 'logic' that forms part of the internal architecture of Capitalism. A consideration then of call centres, which does not make reference to their historical naissance, may merely limit itself to a consideration of specific relations of production at the expense of exploring this in terms of the wider mode of production.

A significant feature of Braverman's Labour and Monopoly Capitalism and the source of much disquiet has been the lack of willingness to '*deal with the modern working class on the level of its consciousness, organization or activities*' (Braverman, 1974,

27). The rationale for the restriction of the research programme is to be found in an attempt to initially provide a '*picture of the working class as it exists, as the shape given to the working population by the Capital accumulation process.*' (Braverman, ibid, 27). Braverman at this point does not reject the importance of workplace subjectivity (Knights and Willmott, 1990, 9) but rather he draws attention to the '*superficial, remote and mechanistic*' (Braverman, ibid., 29) way in which survey and questionnaire sociology has previously attempted to explore subjectivity issues. Nonetheless, as Knights and Willmott argued, Braverman's position is based upon an assumption of the possibility of studying the 'objective' dimension of the workplace and hence the working class as independent from, and separate to, the 'subjective' element. This separation of object from subject has been the source of profound criticism of Braverman and has led some commentators to conclude that the Braverman-inspired Labour process revival is '*now holed and patched beyond repair.*' (Storey cited by Thompson in Knights and Willmott (1990, 95)

The Missing Subject?

Any attempt to understand fully the nature of social relations within a specific context such as the workplace must strive for the understanding of two distinct domains. Firstly, and this is the occupation of much academic work, it is incumbent upon the researcher to attempt to understand the actual context in which the social relations are situated. This is characterised by investigation, for example, that seeks to understand how relations are conditioned by elements, such as managerial strategies of control or the technological infrastructure that constitutes such a specific environment. Aspects of concern here are largely matters of observable fact; it is possible for example to readily appreciate the technological aspects of a specific working environment and further to determine the degree to which the technological aspects of work condition the actual experience of work.

The second aspect of understanding social relations within a workplace is, in some respects, slightly more difficult to identify. This is the domain that may be characterised as being the 'subjective'. Typically, this involves investigation that attempts to understand how those who participate within the workplace construct aspects of workplace social relations through their own subjective interpretations:

meaning making, symbolism, mythology and interaction. The need to understand both the objective and subjective aspects of the workplace is forcefully articulated by Thompson:

> '*...it is not just 'things' that are produced, [in the workplace] but social relations between people. As these relations concern the functioning and distribution of ownership, control, skill, power and knowledge, we are also talking about the production of ideas about those relations. Ideology therefore constitutes a lived experience, not just an imposed set of ideas'* (Thompson, 1983, 154).

It is useful to identify these two aspects of workplace relations as, in some respects, the literature can be identified as showing a degree of commitment to exploring either of these domains. Significantly however, the literature, which can be said to deal with both of these domains simultaneously, is rather restricted. It is important to recognise at this early stage that literature, which restricts itself to one domain, can only ever express a 'partial truth' about the social relations that it purports to explain. The necessity for explanation rather than for simple description requires investigation of both domains and allows a consideration of both the objective and subjective aspects of social relations, thereby precluding nothing from analysis. This is important because within the workplace both subjective and objective elements have a causal determining power in terms of conditioning the social relationships that are present. A view such as this is an extension of critical realist methodology and this will be outlined more fully in the relevant methodology section. The division of Labour in terms of investigating both the objective and subjective domains of the workplace has not been equally distributed over time. Indeed, as suggested above, the distinction between objective and subjective studies of the workplace has become a key aspect of controversy in studies that have sought understanding of the social relations constituent in the workplace. It is sufficient here however to note the somewhat artificial division of Labour that has been adopted in approaching the study of both the objective and subjective domains of social relations. A brief example will suffice to illustrate the way in which causal powers are manifest within the domain of the objective and the subjective.

A specific managerial strategy within the workplace could be characterised as being an objective element of that workplace's social relations. A researcher may, through careful observation, be able to investigate the operation of this strategy in practice. The researcher may also be able to consider the impact that these strategies have upon the workforce, and even consider the way in which the workforce responds. It might then be possible to draw inferences from this empirical investigation into the effectiveness of such a strategy or even into the nature of management control *per se*. This investigation clearly remains exclusively in the domain of the objective. The explanation of social relations that stems from such an investigation is necessarily limited however because it has failed to grasp the importance of the subjective dimension to social relations. Through a consideration of the way in which the role and objectives of managerial strategies was conceptualised by the strategy designers, the way in which the implementation of such a strategy was interpreted by the workforce and the constructed meanings and symbolism that accompanied such a strategy, the researcher is able to build an account of workplace relations that holds far greater explanatory power. Subjective experiences may have a direct relation to objective aspects of workplace life. In the example above the subjective experience and the interpretation of managerial strategy are clearly conditioned by the way in which such strategies are implemented. This however is not a one-way process. Subjective forces, in the same way, condition objective aspects of workplace life; strategy may thus be designed with an awareness of likely responses. Whilst both of these 'domains' are clearly important to the investigation, it is also vital that it is understood that the domains display a high degree of interpenetration, which is to suggest that each domain conditions the other.

Post-Braverman, the task of those studying the workplace, developments in industrial organisation and Marxism therefore becomes increasingly clear as Burawoy sets out:

> '*the reconstruction of Marxism must examine how the process of production shapes the industrial working class not only objectively – that is the type of Labour it carries out – but also subjectively – that is the struggles engendered by a specific experience or interpretation of that Labour. Or, in my own terms, it must examine the political and ideological*

> *as well as the purely economic moment of production*'. (Burawoy. 1985, 8).

Burawoy attempts this 'reconceptualisation' by demonstrating how the process of production is intimately related to the wider class struggle in both economic and ideological terms. Identifying the process of production or the '*production regime'* as containing two moments, firstly that the '*organization of work has political and ideological **effects**'* (Burawoy, ibid., 7, emphasis original) and secondly that the Labour process contains an '*apparatus of production*' which regulates production relations (Burawoy, ibid., 8, emphasis original). The notion of a production regime containing both ideological effects and the regulation of social relations at the point of production allowed Burawoy to consider the ways in which processes of real subordination of Labour are structured, implemented and maintained within the workplace. Or, as Sturdy puts it:

> '*...the principal contribution of **manufacturing consent** was showing how a form of self-disciplinary and cooperative involvement in work is produced, not from ideological inculcation or socialization (value consensus), but through participation in workplace practices or 'games' such as 'making out' (Burawoy 1979, 27). These practices reflect an adaptation to, or 'escape' from, workers' experience of subordination, yet involve a willing engagement in work effort and thereby, paradoxically, actively **reproduce** the conditions of that subordination*'. (Sturdy, 117, in Sturdy, Knights and Willmott, 1992 emphasis original)

In this sense, Burawoy delineates the active role that Labour plays within the process of its own subordination whilst adapting to the workplace, furthering the Marxist account of real subordination of Labour. Burawoy uses the term 'consent' to intimate a choice on behalf of Labour in contrast to notions of 'compliance' which suggest a degree of coercion. Extricating the burden of exploitation from Capital alone, concern now switches to the way in which Labour consciously or otherwise participates in its own exploitation, whilst still recognising the presence of both control and resistance as characteristic features of the workplace. Primarily, and through observational research, Burawoy identifies adaptive practices as taking the form of workplace

games that are played out by Labour at the point of production. The association of the term 'game' with benevolent playfulness belies the reality in which gratification gained in diversions '*out of work*' effectively become part of a process of internment '*in to work*' as '*One cannot play a game and question the rules at the same time; consent to rules becomes consent to Capitalist production*'. (Burawoy, cited in Thompson, 1983, 161).

Whilst recognising both the critical and supportive response to the work of Burawoy, Knights and Willmott (1990) characterise Burawoy's contribution as 'innovative' and likely to lead to further theoretical developments. An essential aspect of any evaluation of Burawoy's contribution to understanding social relations within the workplace is the realisation that the passivity of workers and managers can no longer be assumed; no longer the dupes of structural processes lying beyond the comprehension and control of agents, no longer apathy, acquiescence and atrophy. The call to reinsert the 'missing subject' (Smith and Thompson 1998) was taken up by a number of key authors. In particular, Salaman proposes to:

> '*...suggest some of the ways in which [*a*] passive conception of workers and managers may be replaced by an approach which regards both, and all forms of employees, as engaged in active efforts to make sense of, and to a degree achieve control over, their work destinies and experiences*'. (Salaman, 1986, 21)

Research initiated by Salaman draws attention to the need to investigate '*the nature and existence of the working class, not [*merely*] assume it*' (Penn, cited in Salaman 1986, 22). Such investigation, argues Salaman, reveals '*the importance of other patterns of social relations in consolidating, or dividing workers into class groups*' (Penn, ibid., 24). Salaman is clearly calling for research agenda driven by a desire to understand class formation and the specific non-class factors that influence it. For example he draws attention to the way in which workers compete against one another, hence undermining the potential for class collectivity. Following on from Edwards, control, from this perspective, is conceptualised as not merely an invariant function of Capitalism, but rather shaped and reshaped, reflecting the shifting sands of both the frontier of control and the specific forms of resistance and apathy generated at the

point of production. Investigation into workplace resistance is then reframed as an investigation to uncover the specific conditions that determine the actual strategies of control that are implemented in any given organisational context. This provides an apposite contrast to the search for totalising narratives that, in aiming to provide a universal rationalisation, rationalise the universal.

In practice, Salaman's supplication amounts to a search for the 'rationalities' that inhabit the point of production, rationalities that effectively both enable and constrain the pursuit of the mutually antagonistic and exclusive objectives that exemplify social relations at the point of production. The debate is then recast by:

> '*introducing the notion of strategy, management attitudes, responses, objectives. In short, once the mechanical functional ... relationship between Capitalism and work is broken, then management knowledge, competence, consciousness become part of the causal chain – necessary steps in the relationship between Capitalism and work forms. Similarly, the attitudes solidarity, perceptions, strategies of the workforce become equally crucial.*' (Salaman, ibid., 20)

Salaman should not be read as pushing the pendulum from 'structure' back once again to 'agency'; his application of Giddens' concept of 'structuration' (Giddens, 1984) is an active attempt to overcome this dualism. Investigating the causes and consequences of the development and evolution of workplace cleavage both in correspondence to, and cutting across class lines predicated upon possession of the means of production, results in comprehensive, if contingent, conclusions.

Changes in the mode of production, industrial organisation and the experience of work were however to bring themes such as those labelled the 'politics of production' to a far greater scrutiny. Following the economic depression of the 1970s, and inspired by the relative success of the Japanese manufacturing industry, so-called 'lean-production' strategies developed, predicated upon flexibility, change and decentralisation. In contrast to Fordist production regimes, under lean-production, class antagonisms at the point of production were supposedly replaced by mutual interdependence and hence co-operation and teamwork. The so-called 'crisis' of

Fordism in the 1980s and the consequential introspective analysis of Capitalism led to the identification of traditional methods of manufacturing production, incorporating aspects of Scientific Management, as increasingly inflexible, inefficient and inert. Specifically Fordist methods of production were, it was suggested, unable to respond sufficiently quickly to changes in the markets for their products. (Bradley *et al.*, 2002, 34) A huge industrial irony became apparent in that the celebration of the rationalised, homogenous, standardised production symbolised as Fordist production became progressively redundant by a generalised movement from mass production to mass consumption, characterised by '*greater diversity of consumer demand and fragmented market tastes*' (Allen, 1992, 170). Allen identifies the central defining characteristic of both neo-Fordist and Post-Fordist production regimes therefore as the search for 'flexibility' at the point of production.

The organisational response to the challenges of the new economic environment are usefully characterised by Wood (1989) as falling into three categories: flexible specialisation, deskilling and neo-Fordism. Following Piore and Sabel (1984) the flexible specialisation thesis locates the potential of new technology harnessed to upgrade both skills and flexibility and generally enhance the quality of working life. Flexible specialisation represents a 'rupture' with Taylorism in that the market conditions, which require Tayloristic production technology, are no longer present. The technical possibilities inherent within the productive process, in this schema, come to dominate and as such, those with the closest knowledge and experience of actual work processes increasingly become the 'generals' of the production process. Thus Wood cites the growth of team working, functional flexibility and quality circles as indicators of the growing adoption of this approach. Such a reconfiguration of the point of production, it is argued, vastly increases the organisations' abilities to respond quickly to changes in product markets. In many respects, the flexible specialisation approach can be seen as a reversal of Tayloristic rules of jobs design. Fordist production, as Braverman and others draw attention to, is problematic in the sense that at its very heart lies a dependency upon Labouring activity. Essentially the role of management became the systematic attempt to overcome organisational vulnerability to Labour through the debasement of the contribution that Labour makes to the production process and, where possible, the substitution of technology for Labour. Under flexible specialisation the importance of Labour to the profitability of

the organisation is reaffirmed and, as a consequence, Capital attempts to bring Labour back 'on-board' through overtly locating the role of Labour as both central and essential to production.

In some respects, the renewal of 'Labour' as the central element in the production process mirrors the move within academic thinking to a reconsideration of the subjective element of social relations within the workplace. It is interesting to note, reflecting movements in the intellectual location of the Labour process debate (as discussed above), that issues of 'rationalities' or the minutiae of workplace life increasingly take centre stage. Thus Thompson and Warhurst state that it is not merely the 'hands' of the worker that are seen as crucial to organisational success but, in the Post-Fordist world, it is increasingly acknowledged that it is the 'hearts and minds' (Thompson and Warhurst, 1998, 1) of workers that are vital in underwriting business success. Such an analysis therefore locates social relations of the workplace, not simply as being determined by processes of struggle surrounding the physical logistical task of initiating and supervising Labour at work, but increasingly the workplace is characterised by a struggle to appropriate and direct the 'hearts and minds' of Labour.

If fluctuating product markets and the intending search for enhanced Labour flexibility have brought the issue of worker subjectivity to focus within manufacturing areas of the economy, the origin of concern with worker subjectivity within the service sector is far more fundamental. The growing importance of personal traits and feelings within the post-Fordist workplace represents a convergence with the service sector that has a long history of recognising the importance of worker subjectivity to organisational performance. Moreover, the growth and development of the service sector now accounts for 76 per cent of employee jobs whilst manufacturing only accounts for 18 per cent (ONS, 2000, 29). Rowthorn and Wells (1987) have characterised the UK post-war experience as one of a protracted bout of de-industrialisation, manifest in an absolute decline in the manufacturing base and an increase both in relative and absolute terms of the service sector. The consequences of deindustrialisation, whilst profound, are beyond the scope of this current investigation. However a specific consequence is worth noting at this stage; the growth in employment within the service sector has not been an even development,

the growth in Service employment, has to a large extent, reflected the growing participation of females within the workforce and this has been associated with a rising trend towards part-time working.

The Labour process tradition, historically associated with manual Labour, is however not rendered superfluous in relation to exploring the social relations within the workplace within the context of non-manual Labour. Returning to Marx, Smith, Knights and Willmott make two observations about the non-manual Labour process; firstly that the existing division of Labour within Capitalist societies is predicated upon *'co-operative activity' and thus 'collective Labour is composed of occupations both close to, and those at some distance from, the point of production'*. (Smith, Knights and Willmott, 1991, 1) Secondly, a Labour process does not by its mere existence result in the production of a physical good or commodity, but the provision of a service which terminates in an exchange value is equally amenable to processes of valorisation. This reconsideration of the orthodox Marxist account is useful in that it draws attention to the capacity of a Marxist-orientated analysis to provide an explanatory critique of current employment trends. However Smith, Knights and Willmott's (1991) focus on 'distance' from the point of production effectively fetishises manufacturing production and consequently undermines an analysis which understands all work: service, manual, or skilled under Capitalism as 'production'. Indeed Braverman devoted great attention to a consideration of the tendency of deskilling as applied to the non-manual Labour process of office, administrative and clerical staff. Despite the uneven nature of the growth in service sector employment, some commentators have heralded post-manufacturing employment possibilities as a welcome qualitative improvement in the content of job design where '*information generation, gathering, processing and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power'* (Castells, cited in Thompson and McHugh, 2002). From this perspective the control, organisation and application of knowledge become the key functions of organisations. The elevation of knowledge as a key resource of the industrial organisation, whilst having massive implications for the structure and function of organisations, has even bigger consequences for those involved at the point of production, within the context of what they do and how they do it. As Warhurst and Thompson illustrate:

> *'old vertical division[s] of Labour will be replaced by horizontal co-ordination. This is driven by the nature of knowledge work itself, which is essentially concerned with problem solving, problem identifying and strategic brokering between the two processes'* (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998, 2).

It is against a background of a growing service sector, the increasing centralisation of 'knowledge' as a key organisational resource and increasing demands being placed upon the 'hearts and minds' of employees, that call centres as a specific mode of industrial activity have developed.

Resistance: Form and Variations

Calls to reinsert the missing subject into labour process analysis clearly foreground the capacity of workplace social relations to contain elements resistance to managerial control. Beyond the formal and collective forms of resistance such as those organised through trade unions, the informal, individual and idiosyncratic responses to managerial control often form the basis of organisational ethnographies. Despite the documentation and prevalence of forms of workplace resistance attempts to theorise such behaviour have been few and far between. A notable exception to this is the work of Hodson which seeks to develop four paradigms of resistance namely deflecting abuse, regulating the amount and intensity of work, defending autonomy, and expanding worker control through participation (Hodson, 1995). Following from this conceptualisation of resistance, Hodson is able to explore ethnographic material and make links between various paradigms of resistance and specific observed behaviour, so for example the development of alternative work procedures, or subverting regulations such as those documents by Bensman and Gerver (1963) are judged as typical responses to workers attempts to regulate the amount of work (Hodson, 1995, 89). This builds upon Ackroyd and Thompson's conception of resistance as 'non-productive behaviour'. Moreover Ackroyd and Thompson themselves are able to offer further insights into potential dimensions to resistance which might, they claim form part, of an attempt to appropriate time, work, product, identity (1999, 25) or any combination of these.

Call Centres

A notable feature of the already sizable and growing academic literature which focuses upon call centres is the positioning from which the research is carried out. In many instances this is based upon formal observational data and statistics (Fernie & Metcalf 1997), interviews with those involved in call centre work (Frenkel, S *et al.*; Belt, 2002; Belt *at al.* 2002 Mullholland, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Korczynski, 2001), or case studies (Taylor & Bain 2001) Longitudinal and ethnographic accounts of such workplaces are entirely absent from the literature. (Notable exceptions being Wray-Bliss, 2001 and Houlihan. 2001, 2002) This may be due to a number of reasons such as the difficulty of access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), the time needed to complete a longitudinal study (Brewer, 2000) and the relatively infant nature of call centres as a form of industrial organisation.

A further feature of recent work on call centres is the plurality of perspectives that are employed when investigating call centres with analysis containing a number of disparate themes and conclusions. In part, this reflects the multi-disciplinary interest that call centres have attracted but, as a result, it becomes difficult, when reading the literature, to determine substantive knowledge claims as to: a) the historical processes that have led to the emergence of call centres as a significant feature of industrial organisation and b) the underlying Labour Processes internal to call centre work. This thesis, in part, aims to address these issues.

Whilst there is no dominant theoretical position to emerge from the literature, a theme that is fairly consistent throughout the research has been the issue of workplace control and resistance. In some respects this reflects the importance of the investigation into workplace resistance to the wider literature on work and the Labour Process in which the call centre debate is embedded (Lupton, 1963; Cunnison, 1963; Ditton, 1972; 1977; Mars, 1973; 1983; Beynon, 1973; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1979; Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982). Work upon call centre resistance is distinguished however by its focus upon the capacity for resistant practices in the face of managerial surveillance, rather than the identification of specific resistant practice. (Fernie and Metcalf, 1997; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Bain and Taylor, 2000). This can be contrasted with the broad corpus

of work on resistance, which tends to use the identification of resistant practices as a departure point in an effort to understand and explain the recalcitrant worker.

In seeking to understand why so much attention has focused on call centres, it becomes necessary to appreciate the historical positioning that call centres occupy. Call centres as a form of industrial organisation are located at a unique terminus in terms of organisational studies; this location is arrived at through the intersection of three important trajectories of organisational evolution. Firstly, the call centre, more than any other form of industrial organisation, embodies the changes that have taken place in advanced Capitalist countries, from exclusively manufacturing activity to service-orientated work. Secondly, the nature of work in call centres is made possible by the combination of specific computer software, integrated telephony and regulated working practices. Whilst academic work has focused upon individual or specific issues such as the impact of new technology on job design or the impact of new working practices upon industrial relations, the birth of the call centre represents a synthesis of these two important aspects of work organisation within a discrete historical context. Finally, call centre employment is now so significant that the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 2001) has estimated that there are currently 400,000 full time jobs within the industry, and that by 2002, 2.3 per cent of the working population within the UK will be directly employed in call centre environments. These factors provide a broad understanding of why call centres have received so much attention.

The combination of these three forces has significantly influenced academic thinking and writing on the issue of call centres. As suggested above, it was notable that a number of studies deal with the issue of resistance. The work of Fernie and Metcalfe (1997) highlighted the impact that the technological infrastructure of call centre work has, and specifically the opportunities that this generates for management in terms of surveillance. Broadly it is suggested that the possibility of covert surveillance of any call centre worker at any time means that resistant work practices become obsolete, as managerial power is 'rendered perfect'. This work found an historical precedent in the form of Michel Foucault's use of Bentham's panopticon, (Foucault, 1977) but has been roundly criticised for oversimplifying call centre work and for ignoring the subjectivity of call centre Labour Processes and the possibility of non-observable

forms of resistance on the part of call centre workers. Criticism, however, of Fernier and Metcalfe's work energised the call centre debate and provoked a number of critical responses. Whilst Fernie and Metcalf restrict their analysis to call centre environments their work can be seen as reflecting a broader trend within organisational management literature which is concerned to explore the effects, both intended and unintended, of the growth in new forms of production organisation, as discussed previously, such as 'Just in Time Production' and 'Total Quality Management' (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). Sewell and Wilkinson find that under such production regimes surveillance is both 'created' and 'demanded' and that this is facilitated horizontally through increasing team work and hence 'peer' surveillance and vertically through increasingly sophisticated and complex management information systems. Both Sewell and Wilkinson and Fernie and Metcalf portray the fundamental difficulties in active modes of employee resistance under 'new' organisational regimes. This research agenda, namely the capacity for, and effectuation of employee resistance, represents a renewal of interest in issues that relate to workplace relations at points of production. This emphasis upon resistance and issues of workplace control was to some degree at odds with wider trends in the study of working practices to be found within the proximate management literature. The dominant Human Resource Management (HRM) paradigm has replaced an emphasis on the agency of Labour and the associated historical view of '*contested terrain*' (Edwards, 1979) with a managerial perspective, which seeks to reconcile organisational objectives with the goals of sectional interests such as the workforce. The hegemonic influence of the HRM paradigm in organisational studies has resulted in a loss of status for explicit studies of workplace resistance. As a diversified form of personnel management, which adopts both a pastoral and administratively instrumental disposition towards Labour (Armstrong, 1987), the emergence of HRM is associated with the failure of American management systems in the face of Japanese competition (Legge, 1995). The HRM approach, which replaces dialectical class antagonisms with sectional interests, negates the workplace as the fundamental location where the historic struggle of Capital and Labour is played out. The preoccupation of call centre analysis with the issue of workplace resistance may therefore be considered somewhat at odds with wider trends in organisational studies. The lack of an explicit commitment to the study of resistance has not gone without critical comment. Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) have persuasively argued for a

reinstatement of an agenda that is predisposed to the study of resistant practices in the workplace, locating resistant practices as a key fissure between management and Labour. Furthermore, they note that the decline of what may be termed the '*resistance agenda*' coincides with a general decline in political collectivity as a result of the dismemberment of traditional working class forms of workplace representation.

An interesting empirical investigation of the capacity for resistance under new forms of workplace relations is documented by Knights and McCabe (1998). Investigating the recent effects of Business Process Reengineering within a case study located in the financial services, Knights and McCabe find that:

> *'Irrespective of the increased control over staff through information technology-based surveillance and monitoring systems, management is able neither to secure total control nor eradicate the spaces of employee resistance'.* (Knights and McCabe, 1998, 182)

The metaphorical use of the term 'space' is interesting as it promotes the idea of a real physical rupture, which exists within a linear frontier of control. These gaps within the frontier of control allow managerial imperatives and intentions to be breached and thus subverted. Knights and McCabe further make explicit that the paths into such resistant spaces are the result of individual choice. The level of autonomy that such analysis presupposes has a significant impact upon the structural ability of systems of control, electronic or otherwise, to be rendered 'perfect' (cf. Fernie and Metcalf). Despite the recognition of the multitudinous dimensions of the pursuit and exploitation of such spaces of resistance however, care must be taken not to assume that acts of resistance form part of a strategy, are widespread or are even conscious. Clearly the existence of potential spaces for resistance is not a necessary condition for their exploitation. A further implication of this analysis is that the active choice of resistance or compliance means that, following Burawoy, workers simply negotiate their conditions of exploitation through their patterns of resistance and compliance. Thus:

> *'staff are not simply victims of management control, but are often active participants in the conditions that maintain and reproduce control and the*

> *stress and resistance that may follow as a result. Through engaging in ways to alleviate stress, often through resistance but also individual stress-management techniques, staff sustain the conditions of its reproduction*'. (Knights and McCabe 1998:188).

The claims made by Knights and McCabe regarding the existence of spaces of resistance within the workplace are relatively authenticated by their commitment to an empirical research methodology. Their comments regarding research into the causes and consequences of Business Process Engineering are notable here only in that they express concern about the lack of empirically-based studies within the literature that they consulted. Indeed they identify two broad positions that they term 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' but suggest that proponents of both camps adhere on the basis of preconceived theoretical positions rather than empirical evidence. The development of optimistic and pessimistic perceptions on the basis of *a priori* theoretical sympathies is also a feature of the call centre literature. In attempting to transcend such a dualism, Frenkel *et al.* (1998) in a similar manner to Knights and McCabe, set out to move beyond a normative dualism by looking for an overarching narrative, or in their terminology a 'model' of call centre organisation, thorough the development of 'Mass Customized Bureaucracy'. Although the applicability of this model, developed on the basis of a survey of 602 customer service representatives, to other call centres is problematic, the study is useful in that it focuses attention on an inherent tension within the call centre Labour process, namely the 'standardization of process' and 'customization of products'. Following Edwards (1979) Frenkel *et al* argue that the move toward Mass Customized Bureaucracy is founded upon the inability of previous structures of organising (in this case bureaucracy) to deliver 'customization of products'.

The insights that a close reading of Edwards may have for an analysis of structural control within call centres was to be further developed by Callaghan and Thompson. They suggest that call centres represent a new form of structural control which display an extension and modification of Edwards' notion of technical control, whilst significantly being proximate with bureaucratic forms of control. Callaghan and Thompson (2001) show the fundamental aspects of control as established by Edwards: pace and direction of work, monitoring of work and reward and discipline

of the workforce are structured within a call centre environment. Specific aspects of call centre control were highlighted as regulation of the pace of work through call distribution systems, monitoring and evaluation of work through collection and analysis of detailed statistical data and recorded copies of individual interactive service encounters, and finally the reward and discipline of the workforce through HR systems supported by recorded data. Whilst the revitalisation of Edwards' conception of control is useful in itself, the identification of worker resistance in the form of collective experience sharing, confrontation of managerial knowledge and, significantly, acts to subvert the structural basis of control are all of direct relevance to the research question currently under consideration. Callaghan and Thompson (2002), using the same case study data, also report on the recruitment and training of Customer Service Representatives and note that it is overwhelmingly 'social competencies' that are recruited rather than technical skills.

Despite the contribution of Frenkel *at al*, Taylor and Bain contend that by 1999 academic studies of the call centre phenomenon remain limited in both number and scope. (Taylor and Bain, 1999). In part they suggest the reason for this may be a conceptual confusion over what exactly constitutes a call centre. An explicit definition is therefore proffered:

> *'we define a call centre as a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) or predictive dialling system'.* (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 101)

The definition utilised by Taylor and Bain draws attention to the 'integration of telephone and VDU technologies' and the Labour process within call centres is by definition therefore constituted by a human-technical interface. The presence of this interface is important, as it not only structures the way in which work is experienced but it also mediates the customer/employee relationship. The presence of the customer at the point of production provides the exercise of managerial control with a new dimension. Thus Sturdy theorises the potential for the customer to control the worker but equally the worker to control the customer (in Sturdy *et al.*, 2001, 5). In assessing the customer/employee relationship that is at the heart of call centre Labour

processes Taylor and Bain draw upon Hochschild's conception of emotional Labour (Hochschikd, 1983), or the requirement for:

> *'one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'* (Hochschild, cited Taylor and Bain, 1999,103.)

Significantly, whilst acknowledging the 'spaces' for resistance in the continuum of management control, Taylor and Bain provide a mere tantalising hint that forms of resistance develop in symbiotic fashion with the nature of the Labour process, thus; *'...emotional Labourers develop sophisticated ways of wresting back control when talking to customers'*. Although this theme is not developed further it is suggestive and it runs very much contra to the 'total managerial control' thesis advocated by Sewell and Wilkinson and Fernie and Metcalf, but significantly it recasts acts of resistance as dynamic and evolving. Despite the theoretical contribution that Taylor and Bain make the most significant aspect of their work is to document the physical conditions which characterise call centre work. Their extensive empirical investigation into call centres in Scotland concludes with an authoritative account of the typical conditions which are endemic to such organisations. This is manifest in a stylised account which, for its brutal and unswerving portrayal, is worthy of replication:

> *'The typical call centre operator is young, female and working in a large, open plan office or fabricated building, which may well justify the white-collar factory description. Although probably full-time, she is increasingly likely to be a part-time permanent employee, working complex shift patterns which correspond to the peaks of customer demand. Promotion prospects and career advancement are limited so that the attraction of better pay and conditions in another call centre may prove irresistible. In all probability, work consists of an uninterrupted and endless sequence of similar conversations with customers she never meets. She has to concentrate hard on what is being said, jump from page to page on a screen, making sure that the details entered are accurate and that she has said the right things in a pleasant manner. The conversation ends and*

as she tidies up loose ends there is another voice in her headset. The pressure is intense because she knows her work is being measured, her speech monitored, and it often leaves her mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted.' (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 115) .

Notwithstanding Taylor and Bain's harrowing account of a typical Labour process within a call centre, the position of the employee within the call centre in many cases as *the* product (Macdonald and Sirianni, cited in Sturdy *et al.*, 2001, 5) has profound effects. Chiefly amongst these is the tacit acknowledgement that the overall business success of call centres almost certainly depends upon the degree to which call centre staff display characteristics of 'High Commitment'. As Kinnie *et al* identify:

'*When the only contact a customer has with an organisation is via the telephone, the quality of that interaction becomes critical and is often the only criterion by which the product and perhaps the whole organisation is judged*'. (Kinnie *et al.*, 2000, 969)

The explicit acknowledgement of the fundamental role of the emotional Labourer within Call Centre operations has led Kinnie to develop a call centre typology based upon a commitment continuum. Reflecting the product market in which the call centre is located, call centres which exhibit low commitment to their employees are perceived generally to pursue strategies which are based upon price competition, as they are less concerned with employee commitment. Such organisations are heavily reliant on extensive scripting of customer interactions and the customer workflow is characteristically of a high velocity. Such a low commitment, low flexibility approach contrasts with high commitment, high flexibility where call centre staff are likely to be multi-skilled, quality standards are given increasing importance, staff are required to have organisational and product knowledge, scripting is less important and staff are encouraged to build and maintain relationships with customers. The ability of call centre organisations to induce employee commitment is a theme taken up by Hutchinson *et al.* (2000) This research seeks to highlight some of the perceived benefits of an introduction of a 'bundle' of High Commitment Management (HCM) strategies that involve improved salaries, team reorganisations and training. In doing so, this research usefully recognises the 'idiosyncratic fit' of such strategies and how,

in relation to business objectives, and, as is the case with Kinnie *et al.*'s (2000) research, the type of strategy adopted is contingent upon the product market in which the call centre is located. Developing the argument further, Kinnie *et al.* find that given that call centres are characterised by extensive supervision, surveillance and control and that quality service and customer service management are prerequisites for business success:

> *'there appears therefore to be a contradiction between the ways employees are managed and controlled and the type of emotional Labour required for high levels of service and customer satisfaction'.* (Kinnie *et al.*, 2000, 968).

The paradox is however not resolved and results in the pursuit of HR policies that are designed to satisfy and exceed customer expectations whilst motivating employees, thus the researchers found that call centres manage:

> *'potentially conflicting pressures by balancing fun and surveillance, by using high commitment practices in an environment where employees are tightly constrained'.* (Kinnie *et al.*, 2000, 985).

Whilst this research is useful in identifying how contingent product market factors may influence the particular pursuit of HR policy, its general claims and the assumptions that they make, namely that contradictory and often antagonistic organisational goals can be resolved within the context of 'HR policy', must be treated with scepticism. Whilst at the level of rhetoric it might be possible to reconcile the irresistible demands of customer expectation with the immovable requirements of a high commitment management strategy, a mutually non-exclusive outcome to some degree is unlikely to triumph. Rhetoric is however, at the level of discourse, a powerful causal agent within the organisation and, as such, the claims of reconciliation should therefore be treated critically rather than simply dismissed as over-optimistic apologiae. As Knights and McCabe emphasise:

> *'masculine discourse that emphasizes competition, control and conquest while simultaneously appealing to care, trust, nurturing, creativity and teamwork'*. (Knights and McCabe, 2001, 619).

Rather than finding resolution however, such contradictions are likely only to lead to the serious and structural undermining of one, or possibly both, of the two discourses. Therefore, the repeated exposure to discourses of fun and surveillance, high commitment and high control is ultimately likely to be unsustainable.

The role that managers play as key arbiters of attempts to resolve such contradictions seems therefore to necessitate significant investigation. Houlihan however pertinently argues that the experiences of managers have yet to be explored fully and, as a result, '*managers' own stories have become homogenised and silenced*' (Houlihan 2001:208). Her own research explores this question empirically through an extended ethnography, finding:

> *'management is a much more precarious, dependent and uncertain enterprise than some of the totalising images used by organisation and managers themselves'*. (Houlihan, 2001, 219).

Conclusion

The review of the literature demonstrates that the academic literature has broadly followed trends within the actual nature of social relations at the point of production. In considering the orthodox Marxist account we were provided with a theoretical and conceptual benchmark which prioritises an understanding of social relations at the point of production within the context of an overall mode of production. The conceptual and theoretical insights of Marx as have been demonstrated have oscillated in their influence over general understandings of the production process. Systematic attempts to explore the nature, causes and consequences of industrial organisations generally originate after the Second World War. Such attempts focus upon the failings of contemporary management thinking, typified in Scientific Management. The development of Scientific Management itself, as both a philosophical position based on extreme rationalism and also a practical application of 'one best way'

practice, clearly has an 'inverted' resonance with much of Marx's analysis of the Labour process. Whereas Marx portrays the alienated and estranged worker under the duress of the desires of Capital, Taylor portrays the growth of a Capitalist dystopia, where residual productive knowledge is collected at the point of production and effectively limits the ability of Capital to effect greater 'real' subordination. Marx's analysis provides the search and exploration of resistant practices in call centres with an initial theoretical starting point. The point of production, as constituted by Labour and Capital, demands that investigation acknowledge the relational dynamic inherent in production. The consideration of resistant practice is therefore necessarily the consideration of social relations at the point of production. The alienating effects of Labouring activity under Capitalism provide the potential for active forms of Labouring resistance. Furthermore Marx reminds us of the need to analyse the point of production within the context of the wider mode of production, and therefore an analysis of workplace resistance must be contextualised by a consideration of the growth and development of call centre industries as a specific aspect of the developing mode of production.

The revival and renewal of Marxist categories of analysis in the study of organisations, it has been argued, can be traced back to the publication of '*Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*'. The deskilling thesis provides a discussion of specific managerial strategies and the way in which these are linked to wider changes and contradictions in the mode of production. As a prerequisite for consideration of resistant practices within a call centre, the present investigation following Braverman therefore needs to demonstrate an awareness of managerial strategies and how these are conditioned by changes within the overall mode of production. Braverman's self-imposed limitation to the 'objective' dimensions of work experience is rejected as a model for the current research. It has been argued that the 'subjective' aspect of workplace relations is equally important in understanding 'objective' elements and moreover can provide greater insight into the way in which Labour itself participates in its own exploitation. In order to comprehend the causes, consequences and experiences of workplace resistance this investigation therefore unilaterally proposes to embrace the search and exploration of both 'subjective' and 'objective' dimensions and how these condition one another.

The centrality of 'control' to the successful functioning of the Labour process has been highlighted within the literature review. This investigation rejects any notion that considers control to be a uniform and irresistible force. Recognising the complexity of the workplace leads to an analysis of control which is influenced by proximate and contingent factors. Despite the specificity and nuanced nature of control, the objective of exploring patterns of control in order to make generalisations remains a feature of this research. The conceptualisation of control as contingent however enables this investigation to dispense with a need to provide an account of control within the call centres that fits within a linear trajectory of patterns of control within the overall mode of production. Theorising control as forming a frontier allows us to perceive control as being contested and therefore, as a related phenomenon to resistance, the present research is concerned to elaborate the contestation of control, which characterises the specific call centre case study. Following Edwards, the research notes the influence that technological factors exert on the development of particular regimes of control. The technological foundation of call centre work is therefore a fertile ground for investigating how technology mediates relations of control.

The critical response to '*Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*', in particular various attempts to deal with Braverman's lack of explicit consideration of subjectivity, provides this investigation with a useful resource for studying workplace resistance. The growing sophistication of the analysis of workplace relations, as typified by Friedman and Burawoy, dispels an overly simplistic notion of unitary managerial strategies and employee compliance. This investigation recognises the complexity of managerial imperatives, the contingent aspects associated with various managerial imperatives and, consequently, the difficulty in attempting to draw unilateral conclusions on the basis of case study research. Significantly, this investigation finds, following Burawoy, the conceptual possibility of Labour's own contribution to its exploitation as a likely feature of social relations within the call centre. Investigation must therefore proceed to uncover the extent of this phenomenon. Moreover, the increasing 'subjective' demands of Labouring activity within a growing service sector render a consideration of 'subjective' aspects of social relations non-optional. The character of service work, both emotional and with the customer co-opted at the point of production, (Bolton and Boyd, 2003) compromises attempts to explore issues of

resistance that do not consider both emotionality and the role of the customer. Furthermore, both these areas, as relatively new aspects of workplace relations, offer the potential for variations in the frontier of control and hence the practice of workplace resistance. The growth of the call centre literature can quite clearly be related back to claims that call centres render managerial control complete with subsequent contributions seeking either to develop typologies of call centre environments or develop models of their operation. A clear and focus upon the experience of call centre workers from an ethnographic / participant observation perspective remains lacking within the literature. This is somewhat surprising given the clear relevance of such an orientation to the considerations of questions such as the totality of managerial control. The absence of such studies therefore provides a clear frame of reference for the present concern; thus the thesis now goes on to explore the methodology adopted in this research to explore the experience of call centre employment and the nature of workplace resistance therein.

03

Methodology

Introduction

This section seeks to set out and explore the debates surrounding empirical investigations of workplace resistance. The aim is to generate a discussion of the key methodological sensitivities requires for an investigation of this type. The chapter seeks to highlight the various methodological frameworks, which might be usefully drawn upon in the context of the current investigation. Building upon the previous literature review, the chapter seeks to outline a number of methodological 'parameter requirements' which are considered a necessary but not sufficient in order to successfully address the research questions. These parameter requirements allow for a comparative assessment of various data collection techniques to be made. The chapter argues that the ethnographic techniques of investigation are considered most appropriate to the research question and most likely to yield useful data.

Despite the preference for ethnographic research techniques, as identified within this chapter, the exploration of differing approaches to ethnographic research reveals the need to argument the proposed ethnographic research, or to develop a theoretically informed methodology for ethnography. It is argued that Critical Realism offers ethnographic research the capacity to general theory from collected empirical data; the development of critical realism together with its central characteristics is explored fully.

Methodological Parameter Requirements

The review of the literature, as presented in the previous section, crucially informs the way in which the investigation into workplace resistance in Call Centres is executed. The theoretical and conceptual insights of the orthodox Marxist account of the Labour process provide the research agenda with a point of departure in the sense that they firmly ground or 'locate' the search for resistant practices within the context of an historical concern to understand the nature and effect of the wage relation. Prioritising the point of production in this way means that the proposed

research is necessarily bound to the close exploration of the actual way in which the dynamic interplay between Labour and Capital is played out; the focus on the specific interaction between Labour and Capital at the physical place where production takes place therefore becomes non-optional. As a direct consequence an investigation into worker resistance within call centres cannot be a purely theoretical exercise but must contain within its remit a significant exposure to the actual Labour process as it exists, and as it is experienced by its participants at the point of production. The research tools adopted therefore must have a capacity to conduct significant observational investigation within 'the field'. Further, following the Marxist perspective, the literature review also highlights the fact that resistance is not merely an abstract category but is manifest as a response to the alienating consequences of production under Capitalism in the face of both the 'formal' and 'real' subordination of Labour. The subordinating strategies adopted by Capital or within the current context, management, within the Call Centre, therefore necessarily form a key aspect of this research. The research effort is thus sensitised to the detection of the direct control imperatives that Capital exhibits in relation to Labour. A full understanding of the issue of worker resistance within a Call Centre can necessarily only be generated following an in-depth consideration of the way in which call centres, and their specific attendant social relations and control relations, condition the experience of Labour and how they are, in themselves, a constituent of the developing mode of production.

Despite the need for significant 'localisation' of research effort, again following Marx, the research also requires the conceptual and theoretical tools to switch between a consideration of the local or 'specific' social relations at the point of production to a wider consideration of the general changes and contradictions inherent at the level of the overall mode of production. Furthermore, the research tools employed within this research project also need to be able to relate the specific managerial strategies employed within the Call Centre to the wider mode of production. Significantly, as outlined in the literature review, any attempt to understand the causes and consequences of workplace resistance must recognise both the objective and subjective aspects of workplace life. The research methods employed must therefore be able to explore these aspects of organisational life in sufficient detail.

Taking into consideration the initial research questions, together with the insights derived from the literature review, we are now able to determine the parameter requirements for the employment of the techniques of data collection. For clarity these are codified thus:

1) The primary research focus upon workplace resistance means that data collection must be able to observe, decode and record data *within* the workplace setting

2) The nature of resistant practices, as identified in the literature review, requires that data collection techniques are employed that have the *capacity* to investigate implicit and subjective domains of experience, as well as explicit and objective aspects of workplace life

3) The adoption of a Marxist frame of reference requires that observations at the point of production be linked in a fundamental way to a consideration of changes at the level of the overall mode of production. Data collection must therefore support the generation of theory.

The establishment of parameter requirements for the development of a research strategy to tackle the initial research questions enables techniques of data collection to be evaluated in a meaningful way.

From the researcher's previous experience within the call centre industry, it became clear that in order to accurately record, explore and explain resistant practices, a longitudinal study would be required, sensitised to the subtle and creative expressions of resistance that constitute the lived experience of 'getting by' within the daily routine of the call centre. The various practical, theoretical and conceptual requirements of the investigation can most effectively be satisfied through the adoption of an ethnographic research method and the subsequent development of '*a call centre ethnography*'.

Ethnography as 'Context'

Ethnography is a method of conducting social research. It is concerned with the

study of human behaviour within specific contexts. Ethnography attempts to study behaviour within a defined context as opposed to in isolation. The contextual nature of ethnography as a research method is important because it provides the researcher with access to the specific circumstances in which behaviours or events are located. Furthermore, ethnography aims to study the experiences of both agents and non-agents; thus ethnography is:

> *'a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in* ***its own terms****, the irreducibility of human experience'*. (Willis and Trondman, 2000, 5 emphasis original)

The commitment to studying behaviour and experience on their 'own terms' is important in the context of the proposed call centre research because it specifically highlights the realm of agent subjectivity as, not only an important aspect of research, but also a central aspect of any research. The adoption of an ethnographically-based research methodology therefore precludes the investigation of merely 'objective' aspects of workplace life at the expense of 'subjective' aspects. Such a position, as argued in the literature, despite being untenable, still pervades much of organisational research. Thus the parameter requirement to study both the objective and subjective aspects of workplace relations in the call centre is potentially satisfied by the adoption of ethnographic research techniques.

The origins of ethnographic research lie in the academic study of unfamiliar cultures and societies as typified in Social Anthropology. The recognition by early Social Anthropology of the 'vulnerable' nature of tribal communities, whilst being a source of both criticism and praise influenced the way in which such communities were researched. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) set out to explore the role that myth and ritual played in the daily lives of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea in the Southwest Pacific. Malinowski's work led to an understanding of such routines as central to community life and an integral part of kinship ties, trade and community hierarchy. Furthermore, Malinowski was able to relate his studies back to a contemporary psychological debate by claiming that individual psychology is influenced greatly by culture, thus questioning Sigmund Freud's theory of the

Oedipus complex. Margaret Mead studied the Manu adolescent girls in relation to American female adolescents and, through ethnographic findings, established that it is culture that influences personality, rather than genetics. These examples of early ethnographic research demonstrate its capacity for linking observational data to the development of theory. This is clearly a specific feature that the techniques of research adopted in this project must display.

Whilst, historically, ethnography can trace its origin in Social Anthropology, ethnography can be usefully thought of as part of a much broader sociological interest in people, groups of people and social inter-relationships. The skills associated with the study of groups, societies and unfamiliar cultures are particularly useful for the close and critical study of the more familiar or perhaps even ubiquitous social formations, such as the contemporary industrial organisation. Countering the implicit danger of taking for granted that which is familiar, ethnography with its sensitising effects renders, through the researcher, the ordinary extraordinary and therefore worthy of explanation. If ethnography is best conceived of as a family of closely related research methods that involves very detailed study of people and groups in their natural habitat, then the researcher is best thought of as an interlocutor participating within the group in an attempt to understand how the subjects of the research make sense of their lives and the situations in which they find themselves. For example Whyte's 'Street Corner Society' (1981) study of street gangs in an American city utilises an ethnographic approach to gain access to a street gang, exploring the operation, function and inter-relationship of the street gang members. 'Street Corner Society' is then able to relate ethnographic findings to broader social issues such as ethnicity and youth culture. Ethnographic methods, as demonstrated by previous ethnographic research, demonstrate the capacity to fulfil the requirement to conduct research within the workplace setting. The adoption of ethnographic methods therefore provides the potential to satisfy the first criterion of the data collection requirements as set out above.

Whyte's exploration of a street gang might usefully be translated into an organisaional setting. In this sense ethnography can usefully be deployed to explore some of the many sub-cultures that inhabit and are characteristic features of organisational life. The ethnographic research tradition imbues a sense of 'place'

and 'closeness' to the research process that correlates to the current research objective of studying workplace resistance at the point of production. In order to achieve the necessary level of contextual understanding, researchers working in the ethnographic tradition have found it necessary to become overtly familiar with the subjects of their research before they are able to claim to have an in-depth understanding of that which they study. The need for such familiarity leads to the deployment of a number of key data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. Such methods are suited to ethnography because they allow for a very detailed study of the subjects in question, whilst minimising the impact of the presence of the researcher as an 'outside' element. Ethnography normally demands such close study that it is necessary for the researcher to participate overtly or covertly in the subject under research. The adoption of an ethnographic approach to an exploration of the initial research question might therefore reasonably involve securing employment within a call centre.

Given the 'context-sensitive' nature of much organisational research and despite the manifest contribution that ethnographic research may make to studies of organisational life, ethnographically informed research only constitutes a small minority of all organisational research carried out. The reluctance of the academic research community to actively engage in ethnographically informed research methods may be because of a number of practical and pragmatic reasons (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Despite such a reluctance ethnography provides a distinctive approach to organisational research and Hodson (2001) provides a useful review of key organisational ethnographies, highlighting their:

> *'long tradition of providing in-depth descriptive accounts of work life across a wide range of settings from factories to white-collar and professional settings'*. (Hodson, 2001, 51).

Citing the Hawthorne studies (as previously discussed within the literature review), the contribution of the Chicago School (Dalton 1959; Hughes 1958; Roy 1954, 1958 and Walker and Guest 1952) and more recent studies such as Burawoy (1979), Rinehart *et al.* (1997) including service-based work such as Smith (1990) and

Leidner (1993), Hodson contends that the great value in ethnographic investigation of organisations is that the ethnographer is able to gain access to '*the emergent subtle life of organizations'* (Hodson, ibid., 52). This is suggestive of ethnography's capacity to go beyond other methods of data collection to gain knowledge and insight unavailable to other methods. Hodson renders the advantages of ethnographic research methods explicit in contrasting ethnography with organisational studies that draw largely on survey research methodology and which consequently:

> *'are inevitably somewhat artificial interactions which separate reports of behaviour and attitudes from the settings in which these behaviours naturally occur. It is these settings that give behaviours or attitudes their meaning'*. (Hodson, ibid., 51)

The quote from Hodson graphically illustrates the sense in which non-ethnographically informed research methods decontextualise research results. Furthermore the lack of ability to both track and trace the trajectories and processes of change within organisational settings effectively presents a series of organisational 'still life' representations. Whilst this presents a broad justification for the adoption of ethnographic research it is important that these comments relate to the specific research parameters outlined above. Specifically Hodson's evaluation of ethnography can be seen as a further affirmation of its capacity to research within the workplace and investigate both objective and subjective domains respectively.

Clearly then the deployment of ethnographic research methods offers this investigation the potential to study workplace resistance within the context of the point of production. The variety of data collection techniques which are often associated with ethnography provide the research effort with some scope of flexibility in terms or the logistical consideration of the deployment of specific techniques within respect to equally specific circumstances. In responding to the first parameter requirement then ethnography would seem to offer the clear potential to robustly meet the established requirements as a preferred data collection method.

Ethnography as 'meaning'

The ethnographic research tradition can be further distinguished by its concern to understand the 'meanings' of social behaviour. Ethnography attempts to understand social meaning. The meanings of actions and symbols, within any given social situation, may be very clear to the researcher. Given the complex and dynamic nature of social situations however, meanings may only emerge through protracted in-depth observation. In practical terms therefore, ethnographic methods of investigation can be employed where the researcher is seeking a very developed understanding of how and why certain groups operate in the way that they do. Such an understanding can only be founded on an appreciation of meaning. The process of ethnographic investigation can be utilised in order to gain understanding and insight into how people perceive relationships, actions and symbols within a social situation, in short how people construct meaning. *'Learning to Labour'* (Willis, 1977) for example documents an extended ethnographic study of a group of working class white boys as they make the transition from school to work in a comprehensive school in the West Midlands in the mid-1970s. The central focus of the research was an attempt to understand why, given the quality of learning opportunities within the classroom, working class boys systematically under performed in terms of examination success and, more importantly, almost always entered into manual occupations at the earliest opportunity. The researcher participated in the daily routine of the boys' lives, attending classes, observing and participating in their movements around the school, attending careers sessions and participating in some of their social activities. This was followed by recorded group interviews with the boys (this group is known as the 'lads'), their parents and their teachers. *'Learning to Labour'* documents the way in which opposition to the authority of the teachers became the nexus around which the classroom behaviour of the 'lads' was organised. This involved the researcher acquiring an understanding of how the 'lads' made sense of their social situations and how the way in which the making of meaning within this context affected the 'lads' behaviour. The opposition to forces of authority by the 'lads' was further extended by a rejection of the values and beliefs of pupils who accepted as 'legitimate' the authority of the teaching staff (this group of pupils was labelled the 'ear'oles' by the 'lads'). The researcher notes

that the chosen form of resistance to classroom authority is 'having a laff', and for the 'lads', this became the ubiquitous method of asserting their own status within the group, whilst also rejecting the 'credentialist' basis of secondary education. The opposition to authority certainly includes a rejection of any classroom work or qualifications. The methodological relevance of *'Learning to Labour'* is the attempt that the study makes to gain access to the world of shared experiences and 'meaning making' (Willis, 2000a, xv) that exists between the 'lads'. Willis, through ethnographic investigation, is able to penetrate the social veneer of relationships that exists, and which might otherwise be mistaken for the full extent or totality of relations by more superficial research, and he is able to access a deeper, but still real, level of existence that resides deep within the 'lads'' social consciousness. A close reading of *'Learning to Labour'* reveals the similarity between the 'elements of culture' which Willis observes and the partially obscured act of creative resistance manifest at the point of production within the call centre. This will however be elaborated later.

A particular method or technique of data collection can, however, not be described as 'ethnographic' in and of itself, rather it is used as part of an ethnographic research process. Ethnography necessarily involves close studies of the object under investigation because ethnography's principal interest is the understanding of 'meaning'. The centrality of 'meaning' to ethnographic forms of research results from an acknowledgement of the 'social' character of the subject under study. The social world is characterised as containing meanings that are both implicit and explicit. For example, within the Call Centre an individual's role within the organisational hierarchy is specifically articulated within a job specification. From an observer's perspective, explicit meanings such as job role and job functions may be easily identifiable with reference to the job specification. These are used within the initial recruitment process and are also used as a method of assessing employee performance. Implicit meanings are often context-dependent and conferred by others and are very difficult to identify without direct experience. Despite the presence of explicit job roles, call centre staff were often required to adopt a role and perform functions that were clearly beyond the scope of their explicit job role. From a perspective of data collection then, techniques that collect surface level data are useful in the recording of explicit facts such as job roles. A deeper data

collection method is, however, able to access a more subtle level of meaning and hence access the implicit world of organisational reality and how this shapes experiences of work. Meaning, in this sense, cannot therefore be counted or measured, rather it requires interpretation within a context. This is why ethnography is concerned with such a close study of its subjects because meaning often has to be interpreted rather than articulated directly by the participants.

If the role of ethnography is to describe social relations within the call centre it is logical to assume that the research process will have to strive to understand both the explicit or formal and the implicit or informal aspects of workplace life within the call centre. For example Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington (2001) document an ethnographic research investigation into a manufacturing workplace. The research explores the impact of the implementation of successive changes upon working practices within the organisation. The ethnography strives to understand the impact that such changes have had on the workforce and usefully highlights employee attitudes towards such changes. The researchers have clearly strived to understand both the implicit and explicit world of the workplace. The research is of note because it questions a prevailing academic perception of employee domination and subordination in the face of 'new wave management'. Significantly, to counter claims of employer dominance and employee acquiescence, evidence of active resistance from the shop floor towards managerial change initiatives is provided. Such evidence is collected via ethnographic means directly from the shop floor and, given the nature of the strategies of resistance pursued, it is unlikely that such evidence would have emerged following the adoption of alternative data collection strategies. Furthermore the article also provides a useful insight into the rhetoric and reality of 'new wave management'. The research presents both the explicit rhetoric and implicit experience of organisational life. Whilst ultimately the terms of reference for the research conducted by Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington are slightly different from the concern with workplace resistance within a call centre environment, the deployment of ethnographic research techniques in search of an understanding of the private values and construction of social values and the making of meaning on the shop floor and how this impacts upon Labour relations have a clear resonance for the current investigation.

Broadly then the ability that ethnographic research has to penetrate the veneer or 'appearance' of social reality and access the social core of agents, groups of agents and organisations establishes a very real possibility that the deployment of ethnographic research methods within the current research context will yield the possibility of uncovering the process of meaning making which logically informs resistant practices within the call centre. Ethnography therefore fulfils, potentially at least, the second parameter requirement.

Ethnography as 'theory'

The need to connect individual instances of workplace resistance to structural changes in Capitalism, as established by the third research parameter, proves to be a highly problematic issue for ethnographic research. The role of theory, and specifically the way in which theory is developed from ethnographic research, is often unexamined. Hammersley (1992) for example claims that much ethnographic work claims to provide '*theoretical description*' (Hammersley, 1992, 12). The use of the term 'theoretical description' by Hammersley is interesting as it suggests that ethnography goes beyond mere description and moves towards '*explanation*' as the ultimate objective. This indicates that ethnographic accounts are predisposed to linking description to theory thus subtly hinting at an issue that underlies the third parameter requirement as established above. However the assumption of a link between ethnographic description and the generation of theory that terminates in Hammersley's concept of 'theoretical description' presents a very real problem for the current research project. In essence it cannot *a priori* be assumed that ethnographic research will automatically produce valid theory simply by being part of an ethnographic research process. Hammersley recognises this logical inconsistency within ethnographic research by going on to argue that the nature of the relationship between description and theory is rather ambiguous and unexamined. A link between description and theory cannot merely be assumed for reasons of logic and validity in terms of research results; such a link requires full and robust justification. In order to satisfy the third parameter requirement this thesis thus attempts to articulate the relationship between ethnographic research and theory.

The philosophical underpinning or rationale of ethnographic description as 'theory'

comes from philosophical 'realism'. Realism is defined by the belief that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it and that reality is knowable. From a realist perspective ethnography as a research process attempts to gain access to this reality. In this sense the generation of ethnographic accounts or 'descriptions' draws validity from their representations of reality. However most ethnographic texts attempt to move beyond mere description towards explanation and this is achieved through the generation of theory. The previously discussed work of Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington attempts to move beyond the documentation of the specific research context to provide a theoretical account of observed behaviour. The validity of the theories, which are developed to explain observed behaviour, is based around the closeness of the ethnographic researcher to the areas under investigation. Ethnographic research can be used to both build and test theory. (Denscombe, 1998, 33) The status of theory within ethnographic research can be useful articulated within a diagram outlined in Appendix I.

Articulating the relationship between ethnographic research and theory is helpful in that it identifies the dual character of theory in relation to ethnography. In this sense the validation of theories, which are developed as the outcome of ethnographic research, ultimately must be achieved by the development and application of another ethnographic process that is designed to test this theory specifically. Despite the apparent simplicity of the relationship outlined above, it is possible for the relationship between theory and ethnography to become highly complex. For example theory may evolve within the field, thus theory is constantly tested and revised. The criterion upon which the adequacy of theory is judged is its '*explanatory capacity*'. Despite the validity of theory being tested through practical explanatory adequacy this still does not offer a resolution to the problem of seamlessly moving between the realm of the local and the global. Theory may be able to explain events and actions at a local level whilst still remaining confounded by global or universal issues.

The issue of validity in terms of ethnographic research is clearly a key area of contest and it has a significant impact upon the research agenda adopted within this thesis. In some respects the difficulty in moving beyond ideographic research which claims validity in terms of a representation of a unique set of circumstances, towards a more

universal approach which makes validity claims on the basis of reflecting elements that are common to circumstances beyond the specific, reflects a fundamental and hence recurrent issue within ethnographic literature and practice. This dilemma can be usefully articulated as the question 'What is ethnography for?' The issue is neatly encapsulated in a consideration of the purpose of ethnography. Brewer (2000) for example identifies two diametrically opposed critical themes or 'orientations' towards ethnographic methodologies. These emanate from a 'natural science' critique and a 'postmodern' critique respectively. Both of these critiques contest fundamental aspects of ethnographic practice, such as the nature, purpose and rationale of ethnographic methods. The outcome of these critiques has led to the development of alternative models of practice for the ethnographer and hence the specification of appropriate ethnographic techniques.

Challenges to the Validity of Ethnographic Accounts

The 'natural science' or 'positivist' critique of ethnography has a starting point that assumes that scientific practice should be the model adopted by the social scientist. This positivist view argues that although there are remarkable differences between the natural and the social world, social sciences should adopt the approach to research as preferred within the natural sciences characterised by the search for causality between things in the external world, the development of theories and the uncovering of the universal laws that govern events. Experimentation is the natural sciences' mode of operation whereby variables of interest are isolated under experimental conditions and causality can be ascertained in an unproblematic way. A theory, or a preconceived notion of what causal links might exist, can therefore be tested through experimentation. Whilst the social world is clearly different from the natural world positivist social scientists argue that social research should be conducted in much the same way. Although human intentional agency is undoubtedly a feature of the social world it is held that causality can be uncovered through the isolation of variables of interest. Quantitative research, which uses the statistical analysis of variable correlations, is an example of such a methodology applied to the uncovering of the operation of laws within the social domain. In this view theory is speculation about relative causal candidates that is then tested through experimentation.

There are a number of key features of ethnographic research that have led adherents of positivist social research to reject ethnography as a viable or valid tool for the collection of social scientific data. The failure, or incapacity, of ethnography to adopt an appropriate 'natural sciences' model may lead to suggestions that the validity of ideographic research accounts can be questioned because such methods do not conform sufficiently closely to a robust model of natural sciences. The positivist challenge to the validity of ethnography is significant and therefore it is worth, at this point, rehearsing some of the arguments advanced by the advocates of positivism.

The main mode of operation of positivist inspired social research is through the medium of experimentation. By its very nature an experiment is a contrived condition where the researcher intervenes in an attempt to gain 'closure' around the variables of interest. The intervention of the researcher however is limited to the establishment of the controlled conditions; the researcher does not feature within the experiment apart from the initial obtainment of the necessary conditions. The presence of the researcher within the controlled experiment would, it is argued, have the effect of contaminating the controlled conditions and would thus invalidate the result of the experiment. The achievement of 'closure' is essential so that the variables of interest can be isolated from the flux of events that characterise social reality so that those effects that are of interest can be studied without the intervention of other extraneous effects that may impact upon the experiment in an unintended way. The role and status of the researcher as a non-participant within the actual experiment presents a clear problem to ethnographic research. Firstly, from the previous discussion of ethnographic investigation, it is clear that ethnographic methods necessitate that the researcher be present at the point at which investigation is taking place. The requirement that the researcher be absent from the variables under study is therefore not possible and, in effect, the researcher necessarily becomes a variable within the experiment. Proponents of the positivistic approach to the social sciences who would advocate the adoption of a natural scientific model argue that the inclusion of the researcher as a part of the experiment means that data collection becomes unscientific in the sense that the views, opinions, experiences and preconceptions of the researcher will have a biasing effect upon the data collected. A second considered critique of ethnographic methods concerns the methods that are used in the collection of data and specifically the concern that such methods are

unsystematic. As outlined previously in the discussion about ethnographic methods there are a number of technical methods that are associated with ethnographic investigation and often their utilisation is context-dependent. The flexibility in terms of the way in which these techniques are employed is a source of concern for positivist researchers. Specifically it is alleged that variances in the data may be attributed to variances in the way in which the data was collected. When a number of techniques of data collection are utilised the search for causality between two variables is thus rendered impossible because of the 'contaminating' effects of the unscientific adoption of various research methods at various times. A final concern for positivist researchers relates to the type of data collected; in ethnography this is often constituted by observations, recollections, interview transcripts and notebook entries. Such non-numerical data is often claimed to be subjective and hence of little use in generating valid theories beyond ideographic biographies.

The challenge to the validity of ethnographic research that emanates from positivist criticism has led some ethnographic practitioners to attempt to reform and re-orientate in order to meet the expectations and exacting standards of the natural sciences model of social research. Two responses can be identified. Firstly, ethnographic practice can attempt to become more positivistic in seeking to match the scientific rigour of the natural sciences. This might involve strictly monitoring the way in which the ethnographic researcher impacts upon the field, thus attempting to impose some degree of 'closure' around the variables of interest. Furthermore, ethnographic practice might be used in conjunction with other research methods in an attempt to increase the validity of the work, thus ethnography may be used to locate a problem before more rigorous methods are employed to further explore the problem. An alternative response to such positivist criticism has been to jettison the commitment to natural sciences altogether and to seek to develop an alterative methodology; this is characterised by a humanistic model of social research, as discussed by Goffman:

> *'My immediate object in doing fieldwork was to try and learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him... it was then, and still is, my belief that any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots or patients – develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it, and that a good*

> *way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself to the company of the members of the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. Desiring to obtain ethnographic details, I did not gather statistical evidence'.* Goffman quoted in Brewer (2000, 22)

In this sense Goffman and other 'humanist' ethnographers reject the scientific demands of positivism and focus specifically upon the human aspects of that which they study. In exploring meaning, values and beliefs the need for an understanding of causality is dissolved, as understanding meaning becomes an end in itself.

The second theme inherent in the criticism of ethnographic research is inspired by the postmodern turn in sociology. Specifically this takes the form of a 'dual crisis' within ethnography that comprises the 'crisis of representation' and the 'crisis of legitimation' respectively. In the case of both positivistic and humanistic ethnographic traditions, claims of validity are based upon the assumption that ethnographic techniques allow the researcher to get close to the object of interest. It is this closeness to the object of interest that provides the foundation to ethnographic work. In terms of positivist ethnography 'closeness' allows the researcher to formulate appropriate experiments to isolate the variables that are of primary interest. The need for closeness to these variables exists because of the complexity of social reality and the potential to confuse causal relationships within the general flux of events. Closeness allows the researcher to identify likely candidate causal relations and through experiment design to isolate likely candidates in terms of causal connections. The process of experimentation allows the identification of causal elements. In terms of humanistic ethnography 'closeness' allows the researcher to access a level of understanding that would not be possible from a distance. Thus the researcher is able to participate in the world of a group, is able to experience the meaning that the group assigns to objects and is hence able to report this process to the wider world. An important, if often unexamined, assumption made by both types of ethnography, is the capacity of ethnographic research to construct statements that accord to the reality of the situation they purport to explain. Thus in the case of positivist ethnography it is assumed that the research process can identify and articulate causal relations and report this as a 'truthful' representation of the object under study. In humanistic ethnography it is assumed that meanings, beliefs and

values can be articulated and that again these are truthful statements that represent the reality of the group under study. Both of these assumptions rely upon the closeness of ethnographic methods to enable the researcher to access the truth or objective reality of any given situation. Moreover the mere fact that ethnography is undertaken is often deployed as a sign of legitimisation and validity. In this sense it is 'only' through ethnographic research that the 'truth' can be recorded and articulated. Thus both types of ethnography seek to 'tell it like it is' but, in doing so, they assume that their particular view of what constitutes 'it' is both representational and capable of being articulated.

Ethnography, in this respect, has been criticised for being a version of 'naïve realism'. 'Realism' suggests a world that is knowable independently of our knowledge of it whilst 'naïve' suggests a sense of immature delusion. The 'crisis of representation' that the postmodern turn in sociology offers ethnography can be considered to amount to scepticism over ethnographic claims to have privileged access to 'reality'. Both positivistic and humanistic ethnography articulate knowledge claims about reality through the generation of ethnographic accounts that seek to describe the objects of research but in attempting to do so, place great emphasis on the generation of description as emanating from within the object of study. The postmodern turn, in rejecting meta-narratives of modernity such as scientific progress and associated 'truth-claims', renders ethnographic claims of reality representation unsustainable. The lack of objective external reality means that ethnography's claims of representing reality are unfounded; furthermore such accounts are not privileged and hence claims to truth, validity and accuracy are necessarily rejected. Ethnographic accounts cannot be representations of reality as 'it exists' because such accounts are part of a discourse which ultimately exhausts reality. Furthermore such accounts are themselves selected from a variety of possible competing versions of reality. Thus ethnography is one of many partial accounts. Objective accounts are not possible because the researcher is fundamentally and necessarily involved within the production of the account.

The role of the ethnographer, from a postmodern perspective, becomes the crucial aspect in differentiating between the productions of rival accounts. With no 'external truth' criterion upon which to choose between various accounts the only possible

source of differentiation becomes the actual Labour process of physically producing the account. Thus Bell extinguishes the possibility of objectivity:

> '*interpretations are produced in quite different cultural, historical and irreproducible contexts; qualitative social research is always shaped by the researcher's own personal values, professional identity, political and moral principles.*' (Bell, 1999, 17)

The result of such contaminated data collection necessarily results in the need for ethnographic research as a 'confession' in terms of the researcher's own experience of the process of 'doing' fieldwork. Such introspection ultimately results in the author posing the self-directed question 'Who are you to do this?' (Bell, ibid., 32) Bell however confides that, in the postmodern world at least, an answer to such a question is impossible.

The adoption of ethnographic research for the purpose of relating localised observations to more generalised statements, or in other words *'focus[ing] empirical research on the theoretical issues that it is designed to illuminate'* (Porter, 2000) is problematic. The following section attempts to develop ethnographic research in a theoretically informed way.

Developing Ethnography

Thus far the proposed adoption of ethnographic research techniques potentially fulfils the first and second parameter requirements, whilst the third parameter is yet to be satisfied. The preceding discussion highlights the lack of a codified theoretically informed methodology for ethnographic practice that allows for the detailed study of both the objective and subjective domains of workplace life, whilst rendering this within a broader conceptual framework. The forms of ethnographic research outlined thus far may be in a position to uncover and document resistant workplace activity but crucially remain impotent in terms of being able to theorise such processes adequately. Without the ability to move from empirical to theoretical planes, ethnographic explanation, which is the central goal of this research, necessarily becomes restricted to the ideographic. Clearly a framework is required

to support both empirical investigation and theoretical extensions. Such a framework would facilitate the development of theory to move beyond ideographs and to develop generalisable statements, whilst retaining a clear resonance with the fieldwork.

Historically the focus upon what constitutes valid and worthwhile knowledge, epistemology, has led to a polarisation of research paradigms between positivism and relativism. The distance between these two methodological positions has a significant impact upon the conduct of research. Both research paradigms are a mass or ensemble of rules, practices, habits and customs. It would seem from the previous discussion that two approaches to ethnographic investigation are possible. Firstly ethnography can proceed in a positivist sense, whereby ethnographic research is part of a broad implementation of scientific experimentation in an attempt to understand the world, or alternatively ethnography can be used as a tool for the production of alternative discourses. This choice however is false in the sense that it makes ontological assumptions that are flawed. The edifice upon which this polarisation of research methods rests, namely a focus upon epistemology, is not without question. Realism, in particular, questions the all-embracing focus upon epistemological issues that both positivism and relativism adopt. In contrast realism, rather than being informed by debates concerning what constitutes 'valid knowledge', is primarily informed by an examination of 'what exists'. The adoption of a realist approach asserts the importance of ontology and can be considered to be a concern to understand that which exists, or the nature of being. Ontology is usefully considered in relation to issues of epistemology or the second order concern with how we know about ontological issues. The relationship between ontology and epistemology is therefore symbiotic, however it has often been the case in ethnographic research that ontological issues are assumed rather than explored and understood and this is the effect of prioritising epistemological issues. Furthermore ontological and epistemological issues are often confused. The focus upon epistemological issues for both positivism and relativism means that ontological issues become either secondary or, more precisely, over-simplified. Realism claims that because positivism and relativism focus upon knowledge rather than the object of knowledge they necessarily make flawed ontological assumptions. Ontology is however unavoidable; this is because no matter what we

do our actions are based around a certain view, or assumption, of what the world is like, even if we have never considered this issue explicitly. For example, collecting statistical data about behaviour in the workplace, such as absenteeism, entails a commitment to an ontology that is made up of measurable outcomes and also an ability to generalise, from a sample, conclusions which reasonably fit a general picture. Word association tests presume an ontology, which consists of language, and that this language is relatively enduring and hence provides us with relatively fixed 'meanings'. Thus, in conducting any sort of research in which the aim is to produce knowledge, we are assuming that we can measure or interpret our chosen objects and that the data we collect and present actually means something. These are ontological assumptions. The point made by realists is that if one focuses upon which type of knowledge is most valuable one automatically makes a number of important assumptions about what the world is really like in the first place. For realists this is important because, if the assumptions about the world that positivists and relativists make are inaccurate, then the epistemological claims of both positivism and relativism are reduced to claims of valid knowledge of an invalid world.

Accepting realism's refocusing of attention on issues of ontology leads to a revalidation of ethnographic and other ideographic research processes. This is elaborated with respect to longitudinal studies by Tsoukas (1989) who argues that:

> *'Ideographic studies, from a realist perspective, are very useful in producing valid explanatory knowledge, and ideographically generated knowledge is valid because generality is a property of the necessary relations in real structures and not a feature of the empirical domain'.*
> (Tsouskas, 1989, 551)

Realists argue that in focusing upon epistemology both positivism and relativism presuppose ontologies that bear little resemblance to what the world is really like. In the case of positivism this is manifest in a simplistic ontology in which the world can be known empirically but is unable to include phenomena in research that cannot be measured. For relativism in contrast choosing between rival explanations of the same phenomenon can be problematic, given the lack of an external objective

measure; research thus collapses into the production of rival discourses which are equally valid. Realism proposes an alternative path to the creation of knowledge. Realist research starts from observable phenomena, and asks the ontological question 'what must the world be like in order to account for the observed phenomena?' Starting from the observable the researcher is then able to speculate as to the causal mechanisms, which have produced the object that is currently under study. Realism moves beyond positivism in the sense that Realists are able to consider causal mechanisms that are not directly observable but still produce observable consequences. Realism is also able to move beyond relativism by relating the production of knowledge to the explanation of observable phenomena. Explanations which do not account for or explain observed phenomena are necessarily rejected as inaccurate.

From a realist perspective a search for what constitutes valid knowledge without really considering in depth the subject of that knowledge, becomes accordingly futile and produces inaccurate and distorted results. Much better then, realists would argue, to start with questions about the nature of existence and then to work out, given our understanding of the world, what makes for valid or 'better' knowledge and how this can be obtained.

In the context of the current research questions then the task becomes to use ethnographic research methods to collect observational data from the point of production. However, the need to connect individual instances of workplace resistance to structural changes in Capitalism, the third and final parameter requirement, whilst highly problematic, can be rendered possible through the immersion of ethnographic observations within a realist framework. It is proposed that an ethnographic study be used to detect resistant praxis but that for analysis, ethnography will be augmented with realism, which allows for the generation of theory from an empirical level to the level of generative structural causal mechanisms. Whilst it is possible to discern a number of variant of realist social research, an approach that has attracted increasing attention recently has been critical realism. Whilst retaining a commitment to realist research, critical realism also offers a number of procedural rules for research and, in particular, the development of theory following observational data collection.

A Theoretically-Informed Methodology for Ethnography

The aim of this section is to provide a brief introduction to critical realism as it relates to social investigation. The account that is provided should be considered as a stylised account, in that it is probably not representative of any one theorist's position, but rather it aims to give a flavour of those arguments that have been advanced in support of critical realism. This account is drawn from various sources most notably, Archer, M. *et al.* (eds.) (1998) Collier (1994), Lawson (1997) and Sayer (1992, 2000). It is also notable that, particularly recently, a number of strands of critical realist thought have begun to emerge (Brown *et al*, 2002) and whilst this is perhaps to be expected of a maturing literature, the approach adopted here will not give an account of these various strands, rather it aims to provide a brief summary of those elements of critical realism that are considered to be relatively unproblematic. As a result, this section focuses upon those aspects within critical realism that show a degree of commonality.

Critical realists share a common ancestry and it is widely acknowledged that this philosophical and human science approach originates with the work of Roy Bhaskar. Whilst the initial publication of *A Realist Theory of Science* (1997) elaborates a transcendental realist philosophy of science, the later publication of *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998) provides a systematic account of the critical naturalist philosophy of social science. Although these works are seen as seminal texts, they are also considered to be rather cumbersome and inaccessible, and this has provoked a widening secondary literature on critical realism. Critical realism has engendered most debate where it has attempted to move from the realm of a theory of science into the domain of the social. This has produced numerous affirmations of the validity of such a programme along with as many denouncements. Whilst these arguments are of interest and certainly of some wider relevance they are beyond the scope of this thesis. The edifice upon which the critical realist's project is founded is an explicit commitment to a realist philosophical position, as outlined above. Whilst the term realism is used widely across different subjects (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000), when used in relation to critical realism, this term exhausts a commitment to a conception of entities that are

independent of knowledge about them, more precisely, a commitment to the view that the '*world is independent of our knowledge of it*' Sayer (2000, 11). In essence therefore, to claim the existence of any disputed entity is to adopt a realist position. This commitment to realism means that, from a critical realist perspective, objects may exist without any knowledge of them and knowledge, as a result, is itself fallible.

In the natural world the existence of entities independent of our experience is intuitively credible. However, this proposition, when applied to the social realm, is often the cause of considerable consternation and unease. This need not be so; given that critical realism purports to be relevant to societal understanding, then the commitment to realism may be conceptualised as being an acknowledgement of the importance of factors which may not be observable to us. This dichotomy between 'being' and 'knowing' is further elaborated upon by Bhaskar (1997) as the 'intransitive' and 'transitive' aspects of knowledge respectively. This assumption leads to the identification of a duality with respect to knowledge. Knowledge may be conceived as having both a transitive and intransitive dimension. Broadly the intransitive demission relates to the world that exists independently of our experience of it. Secondly the transitive dimension to knowledge is the result of intentional human activity designed to find out about the intransitive dimension. It is out theories, ideas, explanation, views, perception and preconceptions of how the intransitive world is. The transitive dimension of knowledge is the production of human endeavour and therefore is a process of Labour. Crucially there is nothing internal to the relationship between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of knowledge that means that the intransitive dimension is necessarily valid. This immediately has a strong resonance with ethnography, in that ethnographic accounts purport to explain phenomena, as they exist.

A general commitment to philosophical realism results in a number of characteristic features of critical realism and has important implications for the study of the social realm. Realism suggests, given human history, that it is relatively safe to assume that accurate knowledge about the world, and the way in which it operates, has already been created. The quality and quantity of collective knowledge of the world, both social and natural, raises a crucial question for realists; namely 'What must the

world be like, given that we have knowledge about it'. The importance of asking this question, and the impact that this has on the conduct of research, can only fully begin to make sense when one considers how a failure to ask this question impacts upon both positivism and relativism. Specifically, the realist position allows for a fundamental distinction to be drawn between the world and experience of it, suggestive of the fact that our ideas about the world may bear little relation to the world. Whilst the object of study exhausts the intransitive domain, theories about the object of study are part of the transitive dimension of knowledge.

For critical realism perhaps the most profound effect of a commitment to realism has been the *a priori* prioritisation of ontology. Ontology or a theory of what exists is important in the Critical Realist schema because it exhausts the 'intransitive' dimension. This suggests a dimension that is relatively enduring and, while being independent of our knowledge about it, is knowable. The enduring and knowable nature of ontology provides a Polaris style reference point that allows for the navigability of social explanations. For critical realists, science and social science is the process that attempts to discover exactly what this intransitive dimension consists of. Crucially however, there is nothing internally inherent to the project of science that ensures that the ideas or concepts that science generates are, in fact, true, correct or valid. Moreover, theories that are generated about the intransitive dimension are only useful when they provide explanatory power or help in our understanding. When understanding is achieved, it is crudely suggested that these theories accord in some way to the world. Where theories no longer yield explanatory power they are then rejected, usually because they have been found to be defective in helping us to understand the nature of the world. This defectiveness is usually manifest where theories are no longer able to explain certain events in a meaningful way, or alternatively where rival theories, or explanations provide greater explanatory power. An example of this from the realm of science would be the paradigm shift from Newtonian to Quantum Physics. In terms of the social realm the growing crisis of Marginalist Economics would be a similar example.

Specifically, ontology is theorised as being *layered*, consisting of the deep, the actual and the empirical domains that, whilst being fused together, may be temporally distinct. This layered conception of ontology provides a departure point

for critical realist interventions, as opposed to other varieties of social explanation. The real is understood to contain 'generative mechanisms' such as powers, structures or ways of being. The residence of structure, potential and capacity at this metaphorical level means that these powers exist whether they are actualised or not. Therefore we have the capacity to lie, motor-cars have the capacity to travel at speed and Labour has the capacity to produce commodities, although these are merely potentialities or capacities and may remain inactivated in perpetuity.

An understanding of the nature of the domain of the deep is of crucial importance in understanding the actual. Whilst the domain of the deep cannot, in any determinist sense, dictate interactions at the level of the actual, the level of the deep, nonetheless, governs or constrains such interactions at the actual level. It is at the level of the actual that capacities and potentialities may become activated, therefore the potential for a vehicle to travel is realised or Labour power is manifest as productive activity. Whilst it remains true that the activation of such powers may again be unobservable, these powers are not isolated and they react and interact with one another to produce outcomes that are irreducible to their constituent causal powers. The level of the real and the actual exhaust the intransitive dimension to knowledge and they exist independently of knowledge about them.

The sphere of the empirical can be considered to be the domain of sensuous experience and where the manifestations, direct and indirect, of the deep and the actual find expression. As such, this is the level with which we are familiar. It is here that causal powers are revealed through surface phenomena. The domain of the empirical yields data for social scientific research. Importantly observation of data is never entirely neutral, the collection of data presupposes human activity and therefore data is always collected, filtered and mediated through the researcher's experience, preconceptions, theoretical ideas and bias. The conceptual of a distinct empirical domain allows a recognition that a fundamental difference always exists.

The conception of three distinct domains has important implications in terms of the way that causality is conceived. Unlike crude empiricism, causation is not a matter of the regular succession of observable events. Objects, which are found in the domain of the deep, are, or form part of, a structure. These structures or powers

combine to produce new powers and these are realised or activated in the domain of the actual, the consequences of which may be experienced in the empirical sphere. Importantly however capacity, powers and structures conjoin and have emergent properties, that is that the conjunction of powers and structures bring about the realisation of new properties, powers and structures that are irreducible to the initial powers. For example the capacity of Bureaucracy as an organisational form can be understood in terms of its ability to process large amount of information effectively. bureaucracy however cannot be understood by reduction to the powers and capacities of the employees who constitute a bureaucracy, nor either to the psychology, biology and physiology that constitutes employees. Therefore the key to understanding the flux of events is to realise that events within the empirical domain are manifestations of events in the actual domain and that these can be explained by reference to the causal powers, structures and capacities that reside in the deep level. Given that the deep and actual domains are not directly accessible, social research is therefore most effectively employed by positing a) the specific confluence of events at the level of the actual, and b) the deep causal structures governing such events, which would have to be in evidence in order to account for the observed phenomena in the empirical domain.

An important implication of distinct ontological domains is that typically they are out of sequence with each other. Direct correspondence between events in the empirical dimension is therefore unlikely to be immediately attributable to an underlying generative causal mechanism. Investigation, which remains at this surface level, is therefore unlikely to grasp the regulating features of the deep level. The asynchronous nature of these domains, together with a switch in focus onto ontology, means that the role of investigation in the critical realist sense becomes an attempt to illuminate the generative mechanisms and structures that govern the flux of events at the actual level and are manifest within the empirical domain and the conditions in which these mechanisms are operative. It should be stressed however, that the openness of the social system means that whilst mechanisms govern events they cannot dictate outcomes; the influence of countervailing tendencies, which mitigate the effects of the original causal mechanism, can never be discounted. Such counteracting forces can be seen where the tendency to organise work into teams conflicts with a tendency for greater management control. An outcome of this

conflict could be work that is organised around a notion of a team, but where the team leader is appointed on the basis of managerial discretion (Murakami, 1998). The potential for causal powers to become frustrated by other tendencies in complex social systems is therefore acute; hence an understanding of the conditions in which such powers are operative is vital.

Whether these powers are actualised or not is dependent upon other conditions; intuitively this makes sense as managers, who have the capacity to carry out surveillance over the workforce, may choose not to exercise this power. For critical realists, the key to investigation becomes the identification of causal mechanisms, the conditions under which such powers are activated and the consequences of such activation. In the example of office surveillance therefore, a critical realist project would be to identify the conditions that led to workplace surveillance, or even the relationships within the workplace that reproduce the capacity of managerial surveillance. Furthermore the absence of office surveillance may be rendered intelligible through an understanding of counteracting forces such as the relative cost involved in extensive employee monitoring. Therefore it is explanatory capacity, which is the hallmark of critical realist analysis, indeed the inherent and overwhelming complexity of social systems necessarily means that prediction as the *raison d'être* of social science is, in the critical realist view, usurped by explanation of the mechanisms that causally govern the flux of events at the surface level.

The critical realist conception of ontology as consisting of three domains which are typically out of sequence with one another presents a number of problems for the project of social inquiry. As suggested above, investigation that remains at the level of surface phenomena simply describes the constant flux of events. Efforts to supplement description with prediction attempt to reinforce the relevance of this analysis, however investigation still remains at a surface level, leaving both description and prediction bereft of any understanding of the processes involved. Investigation, which is informed by critical realism, refocuses attention onto the nature of ontology and investigation proceeds to explain events manifest at an empirical level with reference to the causal powers, structures and mechanisms, resident at the level of the deep, which produced them.

The complexity of social systems means that the task of social investigation is neither simple nor straightforward. The gap between empirical events and deep causal structure may be wide in both temporal and conceptual terms. However the relative enduring nature of causal powers and their transfactual operation impregnates a characteristic signature footprint at the empirical level that may be traced back to its origin at the deep level. In this sense the term '*tendency*' within the critical realist schemata is understood as the continued activity of a causal power (Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (eds.) 2002). In this view the causal power remains active, even when other causal powers disrupt or even counteract its operation. Thus, whilst it is perfectly possible for any organisation to display a tendency towards devolved and flatter hierarchical forms, this tendency may be counteracted by a stronger tendency for managerial control which overrides the initial imperative, resulting in extensive hierarchies of control. This example provides a clear understanding of how individual business decisions, which may at first appear contradictory, can be rendered intelligible whilst remaining in an overall paradigm or framework such as advanced Capitalism. Seen in this way, the critical realist inspired notion of tendency becomes a crucial perspective for understanding modern organisations. The *a priori* focus on ontology renders empirical investigation incomplete without recourse to the investigation of emergent powers and structures, whilst establishing the fabric of organisations as an arena in which a myriad of tendencies are mediated.

The notion of tendency within the critical realist literature has been compared to law statements (Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (eds.) 2002). The key distinction here however is that law statements presuppose the operation of tendencies, without considering the conditions in which these tendencies operate and the effect that the operating conditions have upon the tendency. This suggests an understanding of laws that are both active and actualised in any circumstance. When applied to the organisational context such an analysis becomes deterministic and yields little explanatory value beyond the scope of idiographic research. In contrast, organisational analysis, which is informed by a critical realist notion of tendency, has a rich potential in terms of explanatory power being able to incorporate elements such as structural characteristics, organisational culture and human agency into the approach.

In summary then, whilst outcomes at the level of the empirical are determined by the relative push and pull of tendential forces at the level of the deep and actual, these outcomes are in no way inevitable. As such, social investigation, which is restricted to empirical investigation, proceeds without a proper consideration of the relative causal stimulus and is therefore likely to yield little in terms of explanatory power. Investigation, which proceeds from the empirical to the level of the deep, may be able to identify and explain emergent powers. This then provides us with a basic understanding of the central themes that emerge from a broad critical realist account.

A framework for Investigating Workplace Resistance in a Call Centre

Following Punch (1998) the design and execution of the ethnographic enquiry into workplace resistance in a Call Centre environment aimed to encompass and develop the 'five central characteristics' of ethnographically-informed research (Punch 1998, 160). Firstly, it is assumed that, as a precondition for ethnographic investigation, the agents that form the basis of the study share a culturally mediated understanding of work experiences and the 'meaning making' within the call centre has a significant impact upon worker behaviour. A further assumption is also made that the ethnographic techniques of investigation are able, in some way, to identify, decode and record such understandings and experiences. From the literature review it would seem that this is a shared assumption with much research into organisational life. It is expected that in-depth fieldwork will render 'meaningful' worker experience and behaviour in relation to workplace resistance. Secondly, the presence of both the researcher and the researched within the same spacio-temporal location provides ethnographically informed research with the potential to access the meanings of events from those directly involved and affected by them. Ethnography has the opportunity to elicit these perspectives through various research techniques. This informs call centre research, in the sense that interaction with agents provides the potential for securing articulated accounts of meaning that support or contrast with the observationally-constructed accounts developed by the researcher. Thirdly, ethnographic research favours study within a naturalistic setting; it is incumbent then for the researcher to become immersed within the

natural setting. In the context of the call centre the setting is clearly bounded; research therefore necessarily is conducted, in this instance, at the point of production. Furthermore it is abundantly clear that, whilst it is expected that research will be conducted within the call centre, the research effort must also be prepared to continue with research away from the point of production. Fourthly, despite the parameters established by the initial research question, ethnographic investigation retains the capacity to develop its terms of reference as new data is uncovered. The initial reference points on entry to the field, whilst rather general, allow for development and exploration of points of interest as they arise. Finally, the desire to understand and explain workplace experience and action may only be successful if studies over a sufficient length of time allow the researcher to become familiar with, and gain access to, all aspects of call centre life. Initially therefore no fixed date was established for exit from the field. Extraction from the field was left to be decided in respect of the course of events and on the basis of the research aims and objectives being fulfilled.

Entry into the Field

The previous discussion has identified ethnography as a well documented method within the social sciences to the extent that it is considered to have been generally accepted as a qualitative data collection tool. (Porter 2000). The proposed application of ethnography in the study of workplace resistance involved participant observation within the call centre setting, allowing the researcher to gain access and insight to the group under study.

The ethnographic method was appropriate to the detection of resistance in the workplace, as it was built upon a sensitising framework where the researcher was sensitised to the detection of resistant practices which may not have been detected with the use of more crude empirical data collection vehicles. Using this method of participant observation, the researcher recorded detailed field notes. Follow-up interviews were conducted based on open-ended questions that arose out of the ethnographic investigation. Relevant site documents were obtained. Specifically this investigation utilised a form of 'professional' or retrospective ethnographic method (Carspecken, 1995). Crucially this method was informed by an educational

application where groups of professional educators sought to understand and reconstruct past practice through a 'retrospective' ethnography. This method was particularly appropriate because it allowed for some of the experiences, such as the company induction, to be considered as part of the ethnography, despite the fact that the ethnography was formally started after the induction had taken place. From a practical perspective the ethnographic data was collected via observations whilst the researcher was working in the call centre. Data collection was operationalised through the taking of notes and observational studies, both at the point of production and at locations related to the workplace. The observation and data collection phases of the ethnography were undertaken during the period from June 1999 to July 2000. The method of data collection was informed by retrospective ethnographic practice and attempted to reconstruct encounters from the organisational setting based on field notes written at the time, in an attempt to understand the significance of events in the lives of those who worked in the call centre. The process of selected, open but structured interviews with key informants further refined the process of creating an ethnographic account by adding precision through the questioning of agents in the light of previously gathered observational data.

In order to undertake ethnographic research at the point of production within a call centre environment I secured employment as a Customer Service Representative (CSR) at CallCentreCo. located in Aston, Birmingham. The occupation of a position of wage Labour within the call centre provided me with privileged access to a rich source of first-hand observational data; this data was recorded in an extensive fieldwork journal for later analysis. Such an ethnographic study is particularly suited to an exploration of workplace resistance, as the status of co-worker enabled the discreet investigation and observation of resistant practices first hand. In this sense the ethnographic study may be seen as a specific attempt to document resistant practices within the workplace. The production of an ethnographic account took the form of an extensive text-based journal that was compiled on my desktop computer whilst working in the Call Centre. This allowed me to record observations of interest throughout the duration of the study. The cultivation of a number of relationships, both within the workplace setting and within a social context, facilitated the development of various 'key informants' who were interviewed five months after my withdrawal from the field.

I undertook employment initially with no preconceived research agenda, although I was at the time considering an application to pursue PhD study, and had existing interests in Economics, Sociology and Industrial Relations. My experiences of working within the call centre fuelled by the growing media interest as documented in the introduction, began to raise a number of questions relating to the development of call centres within the UK economy and the status of the Labour-Capital relationship therein. Enrolment for a PhD at the University of Wolverhampton in November 1999 allowed me to explore some of these issues in discussion with my supervisor. Having decided to focus upon a research agenda based upon the capacity for, and execution of, workplace resistance within the call centre I committed myself to further employment within the call centre in order to conduct a long range ethnographic investigation. Whilst conducting the ethnographic study I used non-work time to explore the secondary literature surrounding call centres, workplace resistance, organisational evolution and the Labour Process debate. Although committed to the investigation of issues pertinent to the resistance debate, I found that conducting the ethnographic investigation and the simultaneous secondary literature review meant that my key thematic categories were fluid and have undergone a number of significant revisions.

By the time my employment in the call centre had developed into an ethnographic project I had begun my initial training in the operation of the telephone and computer systems and I was employed as a CSR, reporting to a line manager. At this point it would have been impossible for my colleagues to have known that I was actively intending to conduct research. However, ethical considerations demanded that I informed those around me and the call centre management of my wish to conduct research and approval was granted. The process of gaining consent began with a discussion with the Human Resources Manager and I was surprised by the willingness of the Call Centre management team to allow me to conduct research whilst working within the Call Centre. In clear terms I set out the objectives of my study, that was to understand workplace resistance within the call centre. There were no boundaries or limitations placed upon my research and the only proviso stated was that the research would not affect my ability to perform those tasks to a satisfactory level as laid out in my job description. I was able to

confirm to the management team that neither the call centre, nor the parent organisation nor any of the individuals concerned would be identified in the process of my research. Whilst I explicitly laid out the themes and issues I was hoping to investigate, the aims and objectives of my project were constantly misinterpreted and my understanding was that the management viewed my project as an attempt to try to understand those factors which would lead to more efficient call centre operations. The persistent misunderstanding of my research agenda by the call centre management team may explain their enthusiasm and willingness to allow me to conduct my research. The consent and authorisation granted to me by the call centre authorities did have an impact upon the conduct of the research within the call centre. Whilst this will be discussed further, it is important to outline at this point that I often felt that my research was viewed by the call centre staff as a managerial project.

The process of gaining approval from my colleagues at team level was far more difficult to judge. Although I had been working within the team for a number of weeks prior to my stating my research intentions, I felt that the statement of research intent had an impact upon the established group dynamic within the team. For example, prior to my research intent statement, I had been considered to be the newest member of the team and therefore it was expected that I would perform menial tasks for the benefit of the rest of the team. Such tasks involved the making of refreshments at breaktimes, the collection of sandwich orders at lunchtime, collecting stationery and running errands for the other team members. Immediately after I had issued my statement of research intent there was a significant change in the way in which other members of the team viewed my role within the team. Whilst still performing the tasks of a CSR the instances of other members of the team asking me to perform menial tasks were significantly reduced. It is unlikely that the changing group perception of me will have had any impact upon the quality of data that I collected; the changing perception is nonetheless significant and this needs to be taken into consideration when assessing the validity of the observational data collected.

In order to organise the way in which data was collected throughout the ethnographic investigation I compiled an extensive fieldwork notebook to record

descriptive accounts of call centre daily life. Working as a team member within the call centre meant that I was allocated a small work area that I occupied every day. The work area consisted of a workstation, telephone unit and headset. The architecture of the office environment was designed around an open plan configuration. The office was L-shaped and housed approximately 15 workstation groupings, consisting on average of ten workstations per grouping. Workers would be clustered within specific areas according to which team they belonged to. Each workstation would be enclosed on three sides by a partition, which would be above head height when the CSR was seated, thus prohibiting eye contact and direct communication with co-workers from other teams. However, on standing, it was possible to view all areas of the office. The location of the computer workstation on my desk allowed me to compile an extensive fieldwork journal, with the intention that this may, in the future, be used as a basis to add to the ethnographic record (Hodson, 1998, 1174). Using a standard computer word processor I was able to compose notes on a daily basis from observations I made while working. It would only have been possible to know that I was recording observations by reading the text on screen, however this would have required close proximity. When I was aware of others approaching me I was able to switch between computer applications, which enabled my fieldwork journal to remain covert. The instances of CSRs working on text documents were numerous and therefore anyone glancing over at my workstation from a distance would not have become suspicious at seeing a text document on screen. The fieldwork document was arranged chronologically and covered the period from June 1999 to July 2000. Although my enrolment for PhD did not officially begin until November 1999, I had from the time of my initial recruitment sought to document all aspects of my employment as a CSR for research purposes.

Initially the observations recorded within the fieldwork journal tended to be of a fairly random nature, for example I recorded observations relating to absenteeism and punctuality and detailed accounts and examples of CSR interactions with customers, colleagues and managers. As my employment progressed and my understanding of the secondary literature on call centres increased I was able to refine my research interest and my specific focus upon workplace resistance within the Call Centre was established by November 1999. Reflecting a more focused

interest in workplace resistance, I found that the content of my fieldwork journal entries became sharper and included specific details on breaks (authorised and unauthorised), time away from the workstation, log-on and log-off times, computer and internet usage and also instances of workplace humour. My fieldwork journal was stored my workstation's hard drive and, in retrospect, this method proved practical but possibly unsatisfactory. On one occasion I was ill and unable to attend work and, because of the nature of call centre employment, another employee was assigned to use my workstation in my absence. As will be discussed fully, levels of staff turnover within the call centre are high. As a result there was a 'revolving door' policy within the call centre that meant that there was a constant influx of new employees to be assimilated within the call centre. Whilst it was difficult for the call centre managers to predict accurately the numbers of staff leaving in any month, new staff would be recruited to ensure that numbers remained above a certain threshold. As a consequence there were always new members of staff in the call centre who needed to be trained and assimilated into the working environment. Despite the presence of new staff, the call centre often lacked the capacity to enable each employee to have his or her own workstation. The problem that this posed to the call centre management team was resolved through the adoption of a training policy that led to new staff working with experienced staff and thus sharing a workstation. Furthermore, workers who were absent would have their workstations used for the duration of their absence by staff who did not have a permanent workstation. When I returned to work following my absence I became immediately aware that someone else had been using my workstation. The seat had been adjusted, the computer mouse had been used by someone who was left-handed and the brightness and contrast controls of my workstation monitor had been adjusted. The length of time spent in close proximity to the computer workstation means that employees become intimately acquainted with their individual workspaces, resulting in workers being immediately aware of very minor changes to the working environment. I was unable to ascertain if this person had read the document that contained the fieldwork observations. I am unaware of any method of verifying if work colleagues ever read this document. This poses a potential problem for my research because it is possible that the data collection could have been contaminated if the contents of the fieldwork journal had become tampered with or made public. In retrospect this security issue could have been avoided by storing the data on

removable media, such as a floppy disk, which I could have kept about my person, and taken away from the call centre on a daily basis.

As well as recording an extensive fieldwork account as a text document, I also removed a number of artefacts from the call centre. These artefacts were often documentary evidence regarding call centre daily life, for instance I removed a copy of the terms and conditions of employment for staff within the call centre. I was also able to obtain a copy of the terms and conditions of employment for employees who were part of the company but did not work in the call centre. There are also a number of protocol announcements, issued from the call centre management during the ethnographic investigation, which were removed from the call centre for later analysis. As part of the continuing secondary literature review I also collected a number of articles which appeared in the national news media and which were directly relevant to call centre employment.

During the ethnographic study I was able to maintain and develop a number of relationships for the purpose of furthering my understanding of the call centre Labour process. I established what I considered to be a number of key informants. These were individuals whom I considered to have an insight into the operation of the call centre and who would be willing to discuss their views with me in more detail on a one-to-one basis. These relationships were formed in an after-work social setting rather than directly in the workplace. Within the call centre there was a tradition, which involved an extensive social calendar, and colleagues would socialise on a weekly basis. As part of my ethnographic research I tried to attend as many social functions as possible. Although I was unable to make lengthy notes at the scene of these social interactions, I would immediately write up my observations of the evening on arrival at home. One of the notable features of the social activities of the call centre workers was the involvement of colleagues across the call centre hierarchy. As a result, managers could be found engaging in a social situation with very junior colleagues, and it appeared that the very tight and complex rules, which governed such interactions in the workplace, were relaxed in the social setting. The participative nature of social events allowed me informal access to a wide variety of workers across the hierarchy. Consequently, access was

far broader using this approach than if I had simply relied upon the access gained from relationships formed whilst in the workplace.

Becoming Part of the Team

As part of my initial introduction to the Call Centre I had discussed with Amanda (the Call Centre manager) the possibility of conducting research within the Call Centre. I had expected to meet stiff resistance to my attempt to conduct an ethnography within the Call Centre, as a number of accounts regarding poor working conditions in call centres were particularly prominent in the national media at the time. Despite this, my research was welcomed. Although not actively encouraged, I was given clear instructions that this should not interfere with any aspect of my work, in particular not to impinge upon my time taking calls. Notwithstanding the clarity with which I articulated my research agenda, specifically highlighting my interest in workplace resistance, the research was constantly misunderstood as a project relating to the efficiency of teams within call centres, as an example from some seven months into the ethnography demonstrates:

Amanda: ... *ooh Matthew, how's your project going, you finding out anything interesting?*
Matthew: ... *well it's challenging but I'm enjoying it.*
Amanda: ... *I read this article I think you'd be interested in it, it's about sharing knowledge in teams, and how software like 'Whiteboard'* (a recent addition to the computers in the Call Centre, discussed in more detail below*) can help, I thought it would be right up your street.*
Matthew: ... *Yes in Cogitas ... it's interesting ... I read that, but you know that the project isn't really about knowledge management ... it's more about workplace behaviour and new forms of working.*
Amanda: ... *yeah, but it's all the same thing really isn't it?*

(Discussion with Call Centre Manager in staff kitchen, record in notebook, later transcribed in fieldwork journal)

After I had completed my initial induction period and I had been assigned to the NewsCo. team, it was also necessary to inform the members of the team about the research. Initially the team members took little interest; the subject was not discussed in any depth although I was aware that there were a number of issues about which the CSRs in the NewsCo. team were concerned. Occasionally within the first month of employment, I would be asked '*what is it that you're doing again?*' (Question from unknown team member, response not recorded). However the nature of the research had been clearly articulated both to the Call Centre Managers and my follow team members. I noted the subject of worker resistance was raised, spontaneously a number times:

> Venkat: (directed to Jenny) *arrr, I'm telling Tina* (sarcastically) *you're late... Matthew did you get that? Jenny is seven minutes late from lunch, quick write that down!* (Group laughter)
>
> (Observed team interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal)

The attempt at humour by Venkat, as outlined above, shows an awareness of the issues of interest within the research and also signals to the rest of the group that caution is required. Suspecting that the knowledge of my research agenda, in particular the focus upon workplace resistance, had impacted upon the behaviour of the CSRs in the team, I decided not to openly initiate a discussion based on themes of resistance within the team but would allow the subject to arise in discussion from within the group and then ask questions to explore issues futher if appropriate. If anything, the veil of credibility surrounding my research that endorsement by the Call Centre managers had given the project prevented initial access to areas of workplace misbehaviour. I suspected that my new colleagues were wary of my agenda and hence were reluctant to discuss resistant practices openly.

The cultivation of a number of key informants throughout the duration of the ethnographic study reflected my involvement within the social aspect of call centre work and therefore I was able to secure ten key informant volunteers who would participate in one-to-one interviews about call centre life. This was highly

significant in terms of my research, as the prospect of conducting interviews to add further precision to ethnographic observations would strengthen the validity of knowledge claims and would allow for limited triangulation of results. The interviews took place five months after I had withdrawn from the field. This gap was left intentionally so that I would have time to analyse the fieldwork journal and to prepare a semi-structured interview format with which to interrogate the interviewees. The gap between my active involvement in the research setting and the conduct of interviews further reinforced the perception of me as a researcher, rather than a co-worker. At the level of interview this distinction was useful, although it was still my intention to invoke feelings of empathy and shared experience in order to gain particular accounts of certain aspects of call centre life. Although no longer actively working in the call centre I had maintained regular contact via telephone calls, e-mails and social activities with a number of call centre staff. As a result I was able to approach the HR manager with a request to interview my ten key informants on site and during working hours. Permission was granted and it was agreed that I would conduct my interviews in mid-December 2000. I was allocated a meeting room and I conducted the interviews over two days. The key informants consented to having the interviews recorded on audiotape and these were later transcribed for the purposes of analysis. The following employees were interviewed:

1) Two line managers who had been employed by the company for four and six years respectively

2) A member of the technical resources team who dealt with the infrastructure of the call centre environment and was able to provide detailed discussion of the technical organisation and distribution of work within the call centre

3) Seven CSRs, three of whom had worked in my team whilst I was conducting the ethnographic investigation.

All of the interviewees were between twenty and thirty years old. Three females and seven males were interviewed. Of the females, one was of Afro-Caribbean descent and the other two were Europeans. Of the males, one was Indian, one was South African and the rest were Europeans. Within the call centre the gender split is approximately fifty-fifty and therefore my sample of key informants under-

represents women. In all other aspects the sample of key informants is fairly representative of the call centre population.

Conclusion

Following the initial research questions and the previous literature review, this section started by establishing three parameter requirements to aid the selection of methodological techniques for the data collection phase of this investigation. Having established the requirements it has been argued that ethnographic research methods are most likely to fulfil parameter requirements one and two. A brief review of the literature proximate to the resistance debate (tabulated and summarised in Appendix II) provides a further justification for the employment of ethnographically informed research techniques for an investigation into workplace resistance within a call centre. Appendix II demonstrates that the recent literature on call centres has focused upon the issue of managerial control conditioned by a Foucauldian perspective, dealing with resistance, or the lack of resistance, only in an abstract and disconnected way. As the table demonstrates, such an approach contrasts to that of the intellectual predecessors of investigation into workplace resistance, who strived to document the subtle and creative expressions of resistance that constituted the lived experience of the daily routine by not only studying workplace life, but also, living it. Given that current investigation purports to explain resistance in the call centre, an aim that is consistent with traditional studies of resistance, in order to update the 'resistance story' and to re-connect with the classic debate, forms of ethnographic enquiry are clearly required. Significantly however the adoption of ethnographic techniques does not, in itself, offer the potential to fulfil parameter requirement three, as a result it has been argued that ethnographic investigation has to be fused with realist perspectives in general and specifically to utilise the insights of critical realism in order to develop an explanatory theoretical account of workplace resistance in call centre environments.

The ethnographic investigation of the call centre will thus explore in some depth the categories of resistance within a specific Labour process. However such categories may remain merely chaotic conceptions and remain sterile and devoid of any insight in terms of their constituent fabric. This investigation now seeks to add precision to

the analysis through a metaphorical move to an abstract level where the simplest determinations will be sought out. This can be understood as the process which seeks to understand the historical 'rootedness' of the call centre Labour process and its subsequent conditioning of resistant practices. Having achieved this level of analysis the project then seeks to move back to the level of the concrete. This time however, the concrete will no longer be characterised as a chaotic conception, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.

04

Call Centres as a Distinctive Form: Patterns and Variations

Introduction

This section of the thesis seeks to outline distinctive varieties of call centre organisations. Pre-conception of call centre employment are also explored and it is argued that these impact upon the ways in which call centre are thought about, as we invariably have experiences as a customer of call centres for example. The section also seek to explore the growing concern over call centre employment that has emanated from the UK National news media. Finally this section seeks to outline the historical development of call centres, it is argued that although these organisational forms are becoming preferred conduits for service delivery, call centres are best understood as developing out of the trend to outsource business services. In particular the outsourcing and centralisation of IT support via the development and deployment of IT help desk provides a useful organisational model for how services can be delivered effectively via telephone call centres. The chapter explores the characteristics of such centralised and outsourced provision by drawing attention to the way in which this process can be understood as structural deskilling. In this context consideration is given to the deskilling debate and it is argued that deskilling interpreted as an historically tendency, rather than an absolute law, provides rich explanatory power.

Preconceptions of Call Centre employment

It is difficult to pinpoint the time that I first became aware of 'call centres' both as a concept and as an organisational reality. In the course of studying for a first degree I was aware of an increasing number of my fellow student cohort who were working in call centres in between terms and on a part-time basis. It is likely that this is the first time that I have come into direct contact with call centre 'work' and through the natural course of discussion I therefore became aware of some of the issues that faced workers in call centres.

As I was already aware of some of the issues that workers faced whilst working in a call centre (although not the Call Centre that was the focus of this research), it is

necessary to attempt to provide an account of my preconceptions of call centres as these may have conditioned my ability and capacity to gather ethnographic data once working in the Call Centre. Attempting to review preconceived ideas that may influence research is clearly a difficult and subjective matter, however it is important to note that my prior experiences of call centres came from two distinct sources. Firstly I knew personally a number of people who were working in call centres; it was apparent to me that whilst the types of jobs that these people undertook varied from taking telephone catalogue orders to renewing television licences, again over the telephone, all of the people whom I knew to be working in call centres categorised their work as 'call centre work' rather than by a particular aspect of the job. This clearly contrasts with many occupations and trades where the workforce generally identifies with the employer, i.e. 'Working for Ford' (Beynon, 1973) or in occupations where identity is derived from the specific jobs task, i.e. 'Tool Fitter' (Thompson and Bannon, 1985, 24). The lack of differentiation between employer and job task that call centre workers made suggests a degree of continuity between jobs roles within the industry. The second point of note was that almost universally, call centre work was seen as a transitional work in the sense that no one whom I encountered considered it to be a trade, skill, career or occupation. Most of the call centre staff that I knew before I began the study were students who found that they could fit in call centre work around their studies. The work was reported to be 'easy' in the sense that it demanded very little whilst providing a steady stream of income. These generalisations are important because they may have conditioned both the way in which I perceived the Call Centre staff in the study, the organisation itself and the general call centre Labour process.

Whilst call centre work was considered to be relatively easy, involving very little physical activity and little mental exertion, key characteristics for gaining employment appeared to be a 'good telephone manner', confidence and a general familiarity with office automation such as telephone systems, computer databases and basic computer applications. My perception, possibly conditioned by the number of students that I knew working in call centres, was that a key feature of call centre work was the proportion of young people employed there. Various call centre workers whom I knew had reported that they found that call centres were good places to work and this was based upon a notion of a convivial, even jovial atmosphere. My overall

perception was that call centres were relaxed, friendly and staffed by young workers who generally seemed happy in their work. I therefore expected the Call Centre environment to be a convivial workplace.

The second main source of preconceptions of call centre work is experiencing call centres as a customer. It is likely that, unless we know of someone who is directly employed within a call centre, our thoughts about call centres are shaped by our experience of being a call centre customer; this is how the vast majority of people experience call centres. As documented in the previous section the volume of service work conducted through call centres has been rapidly expanding to the point that many services are now delivered almost entirely through this medium. Yet the homogenised view of call centre employment generated from my knowledge of call centre workers contrasted strongly with my own perceptions of call centres as efficient business services. As a customer I was only too aware that there seemed to be a range of call centres in existence and that it was possible to make at least some inferences about the working environment from the pitch, tone and general nature of the call. From my own experience I was certainly aware that disparities existed in customer services in call centres, and that this appeared to be distributed almost randomly and could be influenced by a range of factors such as the time of the call, the nature of my enquiry and also the call centre that I was calling.

Reflecting upon these preconceptions it is interesting to note that, in the main, they make a number of generalisations across all call centre work and do not differentiate between the actual types of business that the call centres were engaged in. I was aware, for example, that some of my peers were engaged in forms of direct selling within a call centre context, whilst other colleagues reported that their work involved resolving customer issues and problems. The specific aspects, conditions and experiences of these two very different tasks were not differentiated in my initial assessment of the nature of call centre work. In some respects this lack of differentiation has, unfortunately, been repeated within the early academic literature on call centres, to the extent that this has resulted in Taylor and Bain (1999) and Kinnie (2000) developing typologies of call centre work to delineate the different activities involved. A further inference from my preconceptions is that call centre work, on the basis of those whom I knew to be working in call centres, was perceived

not as a career but rather as offering staccato employment opportunities. The nature of call centre work therefore suited a student lifestyle, where work could be initiated for brief periods of time, concluded and then initiated again at a later date. I was aware of a number of colleagues who had an ongoing record of employment with specific call centres and who entered employment at various times which coincided with university holidays. Significantly, I was also aware of the high Labour turnover endemic to many call centres. Several colleagues had experience of a number of call centres and this suggested to me that the skills learned whilst within a call centre were relatively transferable to other call centres.

In the summer of 1999, in line with the then tentative idea of exploring some aspect of workplace relations within a call centre, and as outlined in the methodology section, I initially decided to look for employment at a local call centre. Being based in the West Midlands, I was aware of a generally accepted regional division of Labour in terms of call centre employment opportunities in that it was widely acknowledged that the West Midlands was not an area which attracted the establishment of many call centres. The areas of growth for call centres appeared to be the South West, the North, Northern Ireland and in particular Scotland. Despite this perception however, there was no shortage of call centre employment opportunities in the West Midlands. The Call Centre I eventually worked for was part of the multinational corporation, but for the purposes of this thesis will be known as CallCentreCo.

The Historical Context of the Call Centre

In order to understand the function of the CallCentreCo. Call Centre, it is important to consider the historical context of the trends in organisational behaviour that give rise to its business. The business model which has been adopted by CallCentreCo. rests upon the logic of outsourcing; this is defined by Kanter (1995, 77) as the realisation that organisations:

> *'do not necessarily have to provide service and functions internally by employees in order to have control over them. But that they often get a higher quality service if they use specialist service organisations which provide the service as their business focus'.*

Outsourcing then is the strategic rationalisation of business activity within an organisation and the associated 'farming out' of tasks to external agencies. With respect to CallCentreCo. its strategy has been to position itself as a provider of outsourced services to client organisations. Its international reputation has helped its provision of outsourced services in terms of credibility. Typically, CallCentreCo. would provide IT support outsourcing; this would mean that a client organisation would be able to devolve all its IT support requirements to CallCentreCo., who would set up a dedicated team of its own staff to service the client. This arrangement, while complex, was repeated with many organisations and as a result, CallCentreCo. has been able to draw upon economies of scale and scope and draw together a successful methodology for outsourcing.

Traditionally, client organisations would have an IT support division already established, forming the point of contact for employees experiencing problems with computer equipment or IT infrastructure. Often the IT support section would be located on the same site as the rest of the employees. It is not unusual, especially in small organisations, for problems to be resolved in a face-to-face manner. For instance, if an end user were to experience problems in printing a document, the difficulty could have arisen for a number of reasons. It would often be quicker for the support agents to visit the workstation to see for themselves the nature of the problem. Once this problem was identified, the support agent would then resolve it. If the problem was due to 'user error' the support agent could also double as a trainer and give instruction on the correct procedure to prevent a recurrence of the problem.

The widespread growth of outsourcing as a source of economic efficiency has meant that the traditional mode of IT support is quickly becoming redundant. The growing use of Information Technology in most workplaces has, in many cases, meant that it is no longer feasible to continue such a personal approach to the support of corporate IT. Often however, rather than IT support being regarded as a specialised function by management, the individuals who fulfilled this role instead of being specialists were generalists often without formal qualification, the person who *could* was so often the person that *would*.

The intrinsic use of information technology in the workplace in many job roles within the growing service sector resulted in a situation where the level of unprofessional and *ad hoc* support arrangements were simply no longer efficient. This led initially to the setting up of specified support departments or 'helpdesks'. This work was poorly remunerated and provision tended to be rather inconsistent. In larger corporations the increasing integration of IT into business activity meant that computer failure became a major cause of ineffectiveness. This replaced the local IT support with a system of professional (often graduate) computer experts that were skilled in the identification and resolution of IT-related problems. Problem Management became a new buzzword. However, this system could only supported by the larger firms as it was costly to set up with high overheads. The trend toward specificity in terms of core business was to herald the beginning of the outsourcing era. Essentially business found that where their core interests lay in areas other than IT, it made little sense to have a department devoted to internal IT problems, which was both costly and difficult to manage.

Having an existing specialisation in IT, the evolution of the Call Centre aspect of CallCentreCo.'s business arose out of the trend to outsource IT functions in the early 1990s. CallCentreCo. has been able to offer specialist computer and technology solutions to organisations, whilst claiming to be both cheaper and more efficient than the cost of providing the service in-house. Typically CallCentreCo. would provide first line (problems that could be fixed or resolved immediately) and second line (problems that required more in-depth investigation and resolution) support for clients' IT needs in the form of a remote computer helpdesk. CallCentreCo. sought to provide this support function via the medium of the Call Centre for client organisations. Generally, this has been a successful strategy for CallCentreCo. and the Call Centre had grown in terms of staff from around 20 employees in 1998 to around 200 in 2000. Importantly, however, not only had the number of clients also increased (from 2 to 17), but the scope of the clients had changed dramatically, reflecting a broad portfolio of clients from diverse sectors of the economy. CallCentreCo. had clearly identified trends within organisational restructuring and used the Call Centre to exploit these trends in the provision of outsourcing and client support.

The Application of the Deskilling Tendency to Call Centres

Relieved of the burden of ahistorical universality, the deskilling thesis has the capacity to provide a rich account of the Labour process. The critical realist conception of deskilling can now be applied to the call centre industry to see what understanding it may generate.

Taylor and Bain (1999) have characterised call centres as:

> '*the integration of telephone and VDU technologies*' (1999, 102)

within a

> '*dedicated operation in which computer utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled [by] automatic call distribution (ACD)*'. (1999, 102)

Whilst this definition is helpful to a degree, it does not identify the nature of the inbound or outbound calls. Whilst the integration of the telephone and computer system provides a conduit to how work is organised, the types of interaction effectively condition the experience of work. Within CallCentreCo. for example, the vast majority of calls were incoming and, as discussed in the ethnography, required the CSR to provide a level of customer care or support to the caller. More specifically, much of the work of the Call Centre consisted of the provision of first line computer support and significantly this type of work is common although not exclusive to many call centre environments.

In order to explain fully the Labour process within the Call Centre, it is necessary to consider the historical evolution of the provision of first line support as the main constituent of production within the Call Centre. Indeed, although the role and function that call centres may adopt are many and varied, the genesis of call centre operations can be found within the computer industry and specifically within the phenomenon of '*helpdesks*'. The introduction of desktop computers into the office environment from the early 1980s onwards significantly changed the nature of the

Labour process in offices. The mass proliferation of Personal Computers (PCs) in the workplace led to increasing academic attention being paid to the issue of white-collar proletarianisation. A notable feature of any office environment dominated by desktop computers is the need for support personnel to install, maintain and assist users to function harmoniously with the technological aspects of the production process. Many large firms established computer departments, which were allocated a dual role of basic computer training and the provision of user support. However, once training was complete, the support role became vital and eventually this support role was developed through the establishment of helpdesks where employees could seek help with computer-related problems. The growing integration of production with personal computer-based technology is manifest in the dependence that most modern workplaces have upon personal computers. The effective use of computer resources is therefore vital to organisational productivity and hence profitability. It is often the case for example that even when the businesses are not directly technological in nature, the myriad of systems, databases and communications means that most workplaces are to a large extent dependent upon a technological infrastructure to conduct business.

Early specialised computer departments or helpdesks often took the physical form of a desk to which individuals from all departments within the organisation would report to an employee who was assigned the support role. This type of operation was limiting however, because often solutions could only be found when the employee seeking help was sitting at his/her computer. Rapidly, and largely autonomously, the telephone became the preferred method of contacting technical support; the support service became offered over a telephone line, rather than delivered in person. From the perspective of service delivery therefore, the computer helpdesk became an early model which many subsequent call centres have adopted. Helpdesks then, historically at least, can be understood as a process of the substitution of face-to-face interaction by interaction over the telephone, and this is clearly a model of business organisation that has been replicated by the call centre industry.

It would be common, at an initial stage of development, for highly skilled workers to have staffed computer helpdesks. The work would require a high degree of technical competence in areas of new technology. The relatively new skills required would

mean that such skills within the Labour market were relatively scarce and therefore early helpdesk operatives could command a premium wage. As helpdesk operations began to expand, reflecting the exponential growth of computer usage within the firm, organisations were no longer able to employ highly qualified staff because of the premium wages that they demanded. The problem of staff shortages in this area was quickly solved by internal reorganisation. Often, those with an aptitude for technical work, or those who had become recognised as 'whizz kids', would be transferred onto helpdesk operations from other areas of the organisation. This allowed such firms to staff helpdesks with their own employees, rather than employing costly sub-contractors. Most significantly of all however, the most common problems reported to the helpdesk were analysed and broken down into their constituent element meaning that appropriate responses could be scripted. This allowed for the employment of less skilled Labour who were simply able to follow set instructions, or scripts, on how to resolve basic computer problems. More problematic or complex issues could then be filtered and allocated to a specialist. The analysis of the tasks facing helpdesks, the organisation of response and the disaggregating of work into tasks for less skilled employees have many of the hallmarks of management practices found under Scientific Management, and clearly fit into a wider pattern of deskilling. The growth of the telephone as the preferred method of contact allowed for helpdesk resources to be geographically rationalised. Where large firms typically needed helpdesk resources at each site, the use of telephones allowed for helpdesks to be located on one site. This had further advantages in terms of costs.

Growing familiarity with computer technology, not least because of the increase in home computer ownership, has meant that many workers are now able to resolve many of the most basic computer problems, which would have been previously resolved by the helpdesk as a matter of routine. Such standard operating procedures include '*cold reboot*' (the final option for CSRs experiencing computer difficulties, effectively removing the power source, ironically observed on numerous occasions within the call centre), cable connections and application error resolution. The status of the helpdesk operative as a skilled worker has been further eroded by the employment of, in technical terms, unskilled Labour. This was achieved through the analysis of common computer problems that allowed for the development of standardised responses. Currently, for example, it is likely that a helpdesk operative

will be reading from a pre-determined script, which will detail, not only the questions to be asked, but also the response, or 'help' that is provided. As such, helpdesk work now largely consists of heavily scripted interactions with little room for either autonomy or discretion. Helpdesks display many of the characteristic features of call centres. The process of deskilling that has been apparent within many IT helpdesks, including the concentration of knowledge within managerial grades, diminished individual worker discretion and autonomy has become a blueprint for the development of call centres and has led many to see call centres as '*white collar factories*' (Poynter, 2000a, 81). The deskilling ethic has been systematically employed in a variety of industries through the establishment of call centre operations. With particular reference to service industries, service interactions, which were once relatively spontaneous, have been migrated into call centres. The nature of the technical and social aspects of the Labour process within call centres has meant that these service interactions are now relatively routinised, highly scripted and provide the call centre worker with little individual discretion. (Kinnie *et al,* 1998; Wray-Bliss, 2001)

Most of the work that CSRs were engaged in at CallCentreCo. involved the provision of some form of helpdesk support. Although none of the CSRs were technical specialists they were able to provide technical support on the basis of scripted customer interactions and the utilisation of an extensive database.

The introduction of deskilled computer helpdesks as embryonic call centres effectively constitute a service delivery model for increased valorisation that has been singularly successful and, based upon the success of computer helpdesks, this model has been replicated in other commercial sectors. Three examples are of particular note. The banking industry has found it profitable to close high street branches and to transfer the work to call centre operations. Although there has been some unease at the rapidity with which this has taken place, the banks have sought to promote telephone banking as secure, fast, personal and convenient. Stressing the positive aspects of telephone banking has helped to obscure the job losses that this has involved for counter staff and the increasingly 'distant' nature of the transaction. The insurance industry has been revolutionised by the adoption of call centres for the sale and service of insurance policies. The traditional door-to-door sale of insurance now

comprises a very small percentage of the total business, while, increasingly, the industry has become reliant on business conducted via call centres in Liverpool (Norwich Union), Bristol (Direct Line) and Glasgow (Kwik-Fit Insurance Services). As a measure of how prevalent call centres have become one simply needs to look at the medical profession. The Department of Health established '*NHS Direct*' in 1995 to be a '*confidential telephone advice line staffed by nurses, open 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year*', (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk, 2001). Providing advice on health care issues, this call centre is also designed to assess the needs of patients and offers advice on whether callers should contact a doctor. The call centre as a method of routinisation mental labour seems therefore to fit clearly into the logic deskilling, with which as Poynter argues is manifest as, '*the business imperatives that led to the adoption of assembly line working and other news forms of industrial organisation in the first half of the twentieth century have re-surfaced and been re-worked in the process of structuring of service industries towards the century's end*' (Poynter, 2000b, 152).

The examples above of the historical development of call centres clearly fit into the framework of industries that have sought to deskill their workforce in the face of competitive pressures. The utilisation of a critical realist conception of deskilling provides us with an account that yields immense explanatory power when trying to understand the growth of such 'new' forms of industrial organisation. Such an account is however far from deterministic; it allows for the operation of countervailing tendencies that may offset the tendency to deskill. This is important as clearly not all call centres fit into the pattern established by the deskilling of IT helpdesks. For instance, some call centres may even be seen as employing up-skilling strategies. Within CallCentreCo. for example a small team of around seven CSRs were engaged in second-line support. This involved more in-depth technical support of customers and as a result the CSRs who worked within the team were often provided with training opportunities to ensure their knowledge and skills were up to date. The character of employment for second-line CSRs was very different to the standard CSRs, all the members of the second-line team were full time employees, their work load was effectively self-managed with only one CSR required to be on ready status at any one time. Second-line CSRs also exhibited far greater discretion and autonomy in terms of their working day. Significantly the second line support

team were reserved to provide support for CallCentreCo.'s own senior executives. The second line support team clearly exemplifies an approach to the organisation of work that is consistent with a strategy of up-skilling. Both up-skilling and deskilling, are however rendered intelligible in relation to an overall strategy of valorisation when conceptualised as being the specific articulation of an underlying tendency. In the case of the second-line team for example, having a highly trained and motivated team to service in-house clients was clearly within the commercial interest of CallCentreCo. Moreover, the real power of such an approach is that it facilitates an understanding of the complexities of the Labour process through an analysis of the interactions and amalgamations of various causal mechanisms in providing an explanatory account of observed phenomena.

Despite the apparent neatness with which the growth of call centre operations seems to dovetail into a critical realist reconfigured notion of deskilling, care still needs to be taken in assuming that call centre work is low skilled. As was noted with respect to the original deskilling thesis, the concept of skill was very much socially constructed within the Call Centre. For example, many CSRs held degree level qualifications yet these were not a specific requirement of recruitment to the call centre. In conversation with graduate CSRs it appeared that many CSRs did not consider call centre work a suitable 'graduate job', hence many graduates perceived themselves as being over-qualified for the role of a CSR. This seemed to fit into a general sense in which the Call Centre was perceived as offering short-term employment as a stepping-stone to other highly skilled, more desirable work. From a managerial perspective, whilst the recruitment of degree qualified CSRs was not part of an active recruitment strategy, it was recognised that CSRs who held degrees were more likely to *'fit into'* (discussion with HR manager, later recorded in fieldwork journal) the Call Centre environment. The notion of 'fitting into' the workplace hides a complex set of assumed or expected attributes and competencies on behalf of CSRs, both technical and social in character. Whilst clearly my own recruitment experience demonstrates the way in which technical competencies, or capacities were activity sought, (I was asked to perform a role playing exercise), the degree to which social competencies were sought through the recruitment process seems less clear. Significantly perhaps, the more informal aspects of my initial training had stressed the importance of being an *'all-rounder'*, as my employment continued it became clear that this euphemism was often used as a

shared understanding to signify the importance of taking part in workplace organised social events. In a conversation with a HR manager I was told that aside from the ability to work quickly and accurately the most important qualities of CSRs were that they were '*outgoing*', '*friendly*', had '*good communication-skills'* and that they were *'lively*' and *'energetic'*. A clear indication of the considered importance of both social skill attributes and social competencies (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002) to becoming a successful CSR within the Call Centre hierarchy.

As my employment within the Call Centre progressed it became clear that the 'soft-skills' outlined above became increasingly important in terms of becoming a competent CSR. Whilst it was recognised that the technical aspects of the procedure of taking calls, ascertaining information and initiating appropriate responses could be acquired through the structured training programme offered to all new CSRs, the all-important ability to manage the customer interaction appeared much more difficult to acquire. Moreover, it became apparent that the dominant view regarding the best indication of the presence of soft-skills within a CSR was the degree to which they were '*up for it*', or willing to take part in workplace social activity. Thus the ability to become a skilled CSR in terms of the social skills considered necessary effectively collapsed into the idea of making an active and full contribution to the social events arranged outside the workplace. Of all the CSRs within the Call Centre it was the graduates that were the ones considered to be most likely to be '*up for it*' (Lizzy's comment in relation to CSRs likelihood for wanting to be involved in social activities, recorded in fieldwork journal).

My own experience of becoming a proficient CSR enabled me to reflect critically upon the general categorisation of CSRs within the literature as low skilled workers. Despite having previous computer and customer service experience, I found the task of becoming proficient intensely difficult. The complexity of the information taken from clients, together with the need to actively manage such interactions in the face of constant time-pressure and managerial surveillance placed intense pressure upon CSRs. Furthermore the initial training of CSRs, comprising of two weeks of initial training followed by a further two weeks on-the-job training suggests the relative routine tasks carried out by CSRs were, in reality, highly complex and difficult to learn. Whilst the development of a call centre Labour process demonstrably fits into

the logic of what might be considered 'technical' deskilling, it cannot be assumed that CSR work is therefore of low skill. It is certainly the case that the technical skills that were very much in evidence in early helpdesks have been substituted with less technically-skilled Labour achieved through both the extensive use of the scripting of customer interactions and the codification of technical knowledge onto easy-to-access computer databases. However the Labour process as experienced within the ethnographic research process was not devoid of skill. Whilst the technical abilities of CSRs may now be somewhat lower, the abilities required, and expected by call centre managers and colleagues in terms of managing customer interactions are far greater. Therefore it might be more accurate to classify CSR work as less skilled in technical terms but more highly skilled in terms of interactive and communicative skills. Problematically, for CSRs at least, such soft-skills, whilst being recognised as increasingly important for customer satisfaction, and hence overall business productivity are not generally considered high skills and are subsequently rewarded with lower levels of pay. As discussed previously, pay within the Call Centre was considered to be low in comparison with average earnings yet, higher than other local call centres. Moreover, although the Call Centre management certainly demonstrated an extensive commitment to the training and development of new CSRs, albeit in the narrowest of terms, the high turnover of staff and relative apathy toward high attrition rates exhibited by the Call Centre management team effectively underlines both the general availability and substitutability of CSR Labour.

This thesis began by identifying general public concern, largely expressed in the media, over the efficiency of call centres from a customer's perspective and secondly, from the working conditions endured by call centre workers. However over the period of the investigation there has been a major shift in the public perception of call centres; this is demonstrated by the extensive use of call centre environments as a background for advertising campaigns for service organisations. Furthermore, at the time of completion, call centres are a less of a newsworthy story in terms of employment practices; whilst occasional articles report on staff absenteeism (Harrison, 2004), concern for working conditions on the scale found in 1999 has to a greater extent dissipated. Ironically, concern for the experience of workers with the industry has been replaced by a growing concern regarding the sustainability of an indigenous United Kingdom call centre industry. In search of lower Labour costs,

UK call centres have increasingly been exported to less developed countries, the Trade Union AMICUS for example estimates that by 2002 50,000 UK call centre jobs will have been exported overseas (Connon, 2003). Indeed AMICUS has been so concerned by the continued trend in call centre migration that it has campaigned for consumers to boycott transplanted call centres and have called for government to intervene to halt the flight of jobs (Hazell, 2003).

The shifting concern from conditions of work to the migration of jobs reflects the growing maturity of the call centre industry in the UK. The response from government has indicated a lack of desire to impede the workings of the international market and hence AMICUS' call for greater intervention has been frustrated. The literature review presented as part of this thesis also demonstrates the maturity of the industry in terms of the amount of research and investigation that has taken place into call centres. Significantly whilst initial research sought to investigate the extremes of call centre employment, efforts have increasingly moderated to the extent that Human Resource Management Journal published a special edition on employment in call centres (Deery and Kinnie, 2001), a further indicator of how call centres have become increasingly mainstream in both the way they are considered by academics and the public alike.

Despite the changing perception of call centres, this thesis is distinctive in that it adds to the growing literature on the growth and development of the call centre industry by presenting an ethnographically informed account of what it means to be a Customer Service Representative at the point of production. Ethnographic considerations of call centre employment still remain largely absent from the literature. A review of the literature proximate to call centres led to the identification that call centres as a modern organisational form are distinctive in that they have the capacity to 'render managerial control complete' (Fernie and Metcalf, 1997); in order to investigate this the thesis argued that employment within a call centre environment as a CSR would enable access to be gained in order to investigate resistance in its naturally occurring setting. The deployment of ethnography was argued to provide the most effective way of investigating workplace resistance. Moreover, that the coupling of ethnography with critical realism would provide a theoretically informed methodology, which following on from the orthodox Marxist account, allows for

resistant practices to be theorised and located in their appropriate historical and cultural contexts and related back to the evolution of the overall mode of production. Whilst critical realism has been used to analyse ethnographic data (Porter, 2000), critical realist ethnography as presented here represents a novel contribution to the development of an ethnographically sensitive social research.

05

CallCenterCo. Getting Started

Introduction

The following section outlines the process of gaining access to the call centre organisation. It details the recruitment procedures adopted by the call centre and draws attention to the way in which new employees are vetted in terms of their ability but also socialised throughout the recruitment process. The section also seeks to outline the demographic profile of the call centre together with an outline of the various grade of employment together with and outline of the general conditions of service. The section seeks to explore how call centre workers made sense of their situation within the call centre and how the structural arrangements such a recruitment process and career structures, designed as they were, helped to construct and establish a sense in which employment within the call centre was differentiated and superior to other similar work. A key feature of employment within the call centre seemed to be the opportunities that appeared to exist for advancement into other areas of the business, the impact that this has upon employees is explored fully.

Entry into the Field: Call Centre Recruitment and Selection

There were a number of ways in which individuals could be recruited to work within the CallCentreCo. Call Centre in Birmingham. The recruitment method of choice for the HR professionals who have responsibility for staffing the Call Centre was to employ temporary workers, which were hired from a number of local and national recruitment agencies. This allowed the HR managers to devolve recruitment responsibilities to trusted agencies and also yielded benefits in terms of the kind of temporary contracts that could be offered. The conditions of service for temporary workers are considered to be less favourable than for permanent staff and provided the Call Centre management with more 'flexibility,' for example, agency workers would be employed on a week-to-week basis. Typically temporary workers within the Call Centre would not know if they were required to work at the Call Centre the following week until Friday afternoon of the preceding week. The ever-fluctuating and unpredictable call volume within the Call Centre ensured that the flexibility of being able to release a significant proportion of staff from employment was an important aspect of the overall management strategy of the Call Centre. The effect on the employees was, however, not as fortuitous. The endemic insecurity of 'flexible'

temporary employment contracts left workers with little scope for long-term strategic decision making of their own. Staff who found themselves on repeated temporary contracts would generally be constantly looking for permanent working opportunities both within the Call Centre and through their employment agency. The indiscriminate use of temporary contracts appeared to correlate directly with lower staff morale and motivation. Although the HR manager was reluctant to discuss such staffing issues with me directly, I have estimated that around 40% of the Call Centre staff at any one time would be employed in this manner. The prevalence of temporary employment contracts within the Call Centre was carefully manipulated as a disciplinary tool. Employees were routinely 'incentivised' to increase performance with promises of permanent contracts. Such was the status of these contracts that they were internalised within the workforce and it seemed that the presence of differential contracts was a key source of division between employees.

New staff who were employed on temporary contracts were often referred to as 'the temp' by other members of staff; this signified not only the relative inexperience of the new employee, but also underlined the wage relationship through which they were bound to the Call Centre, and furthermore highlighted the uncertainty of their future there. A clear 'status divide' (Geary, 1992) existed between temporary and other workers The temporary contract therefore was associated with much resentment amongst the workforce. The use of the definite article in terms of references to new members of staff is interesting; it seems to signify a member of staff not as a specific individual but as an abstract generalisation. Of all the categories of staff within the Call Centre, temporary employees had the most precarious employment prospects. The reference to their general character by more established staff indicates how they are perceived as bring homogeneous, universal, substitutable yet ephemeral.

A second method of recruitment would be to utilise employment agencies, but to offer potential employees longer-term contracts; typically these contracts would last between three and six months and would be subject to renewal near completion. The numbers of staff holding these contracts was less than those holding the week-to-week contracts and often these types of contracts would be offered to those candidates who were able to offer a technical skill such as a specialised knowledge of a software programme or some other technical ability. Employees who held contracts such as

these were perceived by most of the Call Centre staff as being more important to the organisation than staff who were on weekly contracts. Both methods of recruitment that utilised employment agencies led to resentment on behalf of the Call Centre agents who held these contracts. Those with week-to-week contracts would feel aggrieved at the general uncertainty that characterised their employment in the Call Centre. Whilst there were a number of workers who reported to me that the flexibility that the weekly contract offered them was an advantage of Call Centre work, most of whom were students, the vast majority believed uncertainty had extreme negative effects on their ability to perform effectively within the workplace and plan their lives to any great degree, and was a source of great anxiety.

> Jenny: ... (on work) *it's ok I guess, I've worked in other call centres and they're much the same, this one has some benefits though...*
> Matthew: ... *like what for example?*
> Jenny: ... *well CallCentreCo. is a massive, like worldwide, organisation. It looks impressive when I tell people I work here, even if it is only the call centre. Yeah and there is a free bus too, at lunch I mean, it means you can get into Birmingham really easily at lunchtime, I really like that, it shows that they care about us.*
> Matthew: ... *What aspects don't you like about working here?*
> Jenny: ... *The contract* (pauses)
> Matthew: ... *can you tell me more about that?*
> Jenny: ... *It's just that I'm on a short contract and when I started they said that after three months I'd be perm* (Call Centre terminology for a permanent contract) *but I've been here for eleven months now and I think I should be made perm ... other people who started after me are perm and I don't think that's fair.*
> Matthew: ... *Apart from in work, how does your contract effect you personally?*
> Jenny: ... *well firstly I think if you're perm you get more money, because it's paid monthly like, and it's from CallCentreCo. not the agency and I think CallCentreCo. pays more than the agency. But it's only a bit more, not loads like. The other thing is that recently I've been talking to Len* (Jenny's partner)

about getting a house together, but unless I'm perm there is no way I'd get a mortgage.

(Follow-up interview, December 2000)

The use of employment agency staff also had important tactical advantages from the Call Centre manager's perspective. Employees who were recruited through an employment agency were technically employed by the agency and contracted to CallCentreCo. rather than being employed directly by CallCentreCo. In practice this meant that on issues such as wage rates, holiday entitlement and sick leave, the Call Centre manager was able to refer employees to their agencies rather than deal direct with any complaints or grievances. Whilst technically correct, temporary employers were legally bound to the agency which recruited them (Rubery *et al.*, 2002), in practice however, the employment agency had little scope to set independent wage rates or negotiate terms; these were established as part of a contract that was negotiated between CallCentreCo. and the employment agency. The size of the contract and the number of temporary staff required ensured that it was CallCentreCo. who were able to determine the rate of pay and conditions of service rather than the employment agency, whose primary interest was, naturally enough, the level of commission which accompanied each temporary worker supplied. Call Centre workers generally misunderstood the relationship between CallCentreCo. and the employment agencies. As the quote from Jenny above indicates, staff often directed their frustrations toward the agencies when the real source of their resentment lay with the Call Centre management. For example I witnessed a spontaneous group discussion, which took place within CallCentreCo.'s canteen, in which a number of CSRs were comparing the various agencies for which they worked, the general consensus was *'they're all the same, they all take a cut out of your pay!'* (unknown new temporary CSR, recorded in fieldwork journal)

In the confines of the Call Centre environment however, the Call Centre management team did little to dispel the myth of powerful and greedy employment agencies. Employee grievances were often met by disingenuous statements such as: '*our hands are tied, the agency holds all the cards'*. (HR manager, recorded in fieldwork journal). As it was that recruitment agency that actually paid workers' wages,

considerable dissatisfaction was vented towards the agencies, rather than towards the Call Centre management team with respect to wages and general conditions of service.

A third method of recruitment used by the CallCentreCo. Call Centre was to employ Call Centre agents directly. In this case recruitment was facilitated by an advert in the local media followed by a formal application process. Recruitment such as this would often form part of a 'recruitment drive' and would follow a period of Call Centre expansion. This is how my employment with CallCentreCo. was initially secured. My awareness of call centres as a growing area of employment led me to focus my search for work within this sector. Acknowledging the technological aspects of call centre employment, such as *'the integrated telephone and VDU technology'* (cf. Taylor and Bain), led me to conclude that my previous experience within the information technology sector would be useful. I initially began to search for call centre employment opportunities within the newspaper press local to the West Midlands. I was also aware of the growing trend for call centre staff to be recruited through intermediate employment agencies, however, my registration at an employment agency was not necessary as within a week of beginning my search, I saw an advertisement for 'Customer Service Representatives' at CallCentreCo. based in Birmingham. Due to my relative familiarity with call centre employment it was apparent to me that this role was situated within a call centre as the term 'customer service representative' is, in fact, widely known as a euphemism for call centre agent. Application for the posts advertised (it is notable that the advertisement specified that there were a number of positions available) was on the basis of the submission of a letter of application and current Curriculum Vitae. On submission of my application I was contacted by the organisation and offered an interview at their Head Office in London.

The split between root and branch organisational forms is of course a significant characteristic of large-scale industrial organisations, with the strategic decision making such as HR being restricted to the centre. However it is nonetheless somewhat surprising that in this organisation at least, potential Call Centre staff are required to visit a site at which they will not be located as part of the recruitment process.

The interview process involved an 'informal' discussion, role-playing exercises and formal interview. During the informal discussion I was introduced to the two members of CallCentreCo. staff who were going to assess me for my suitability for employment within the organisation. Both of my interviewers were female. There were no other applicants present and I was struck by the fact that no other interviews seemed to be taking place. A significant part of the informal discussion involved a tour around the Head Office. The size and status of the organisation was impressed upon me by the interviewers; as if to emphasise this fact the tour seemed to focus almost exclusively upon the physical aspects of the Head Office. I was told how many floors the building had, how many offices, how many people were working and suchlike. A second theme of the tour seemed to be the international profile of the organisation; to this end I was shown various offices with departments entitled 'Applications Management', 'Enterprise Resource Planning', 'Eurotransformation Services', 'Integrated Supply Chain Management' and 'Applied Knowledge Management'. The international character of business conducted by CallCentreCo. was reinforced by reference to six clocks that hung on the wall, depicting various time zones around the world. Interestingly I saw no symbols or references to what my perceptions of a call centre were, at numerous times throughout the interview day I quite literally felt like I was applying for the wrong job. Indeed, my interviewers, whilst stressing the global reach, even dominance, of the organisation, seemed to be unable, or unwilling, to locate the Call Centre as in any way connected to the corporate monolith that they were intent on showcasing.

The initial informal discussion left me feeling a sense of disconnection between the images of organisation as presented by my interviewers, and the role that I had applied for in their West Midlands Call Centre. The global market position of the organisation seemed to me to have little to do with taking calls and resolving problems, as this is how I perceived the job role to be. I asked my interviewers, during the initial discussion, if either of them had ever visited the CallCentreCo. site at Aston in Birmingham. Unfortunately, they were unable to tell me what the environment was like, because they had never visited the facility. One of the interviewers told me that she was a senior manager, based at their Peterborough site and that she had visited a number of call centres around the country assuring me that I

would find the working conditions acceptable. The working environment was of course not my primary concern.

The second interviewer, following the informal discussion, then suggested that we move on to complete the role-play exercise. I was taken to a small meeting room that contained a chair and desk, on which was laid an A4 piece of paper and a telephone handset. As I entered the room with the two interviewers, I was told to sit at the desk and read the instructions on the piece of paper. The instructions provided details of a role that I was to adopt as a CSR and set out a scenario in which I was to offer support to a customer (the second interviewer) who had contacted me with a computer problem. On entering the small windowless room, I was confronted by a telephone handset that was disconnected from its base. Having read the instructions, I was informed by the second interviewer that the exercise would be initiated when she vocalised a 'Ring, Ring' signal. The instructions on the piece of paper provided me with a structured sequence of events that would assist me to resolve the problem. Although this was presented in a purely textual form, it is best conceptualised as a flow chart. My task was to follow the structure of the flow chart, interacting with the second interviewer to elicit information regarding the nature of the problem, so that I could arrive at a number of possible responses that would ultimately be judged to be a resolution of the problem.

The vocalisation of the '*Ring, Ring*' tone initiated the exercise. I grasped the handset and regurgitated a response, which I had already planned: '*Good morning, CallCentreCo. helpdesk, how can I help you?*' As I was delivering my first line I instinctively turned to face the second interviewer who was sitting behind me and I was surprised, and embarrassed, to be immediately rebuked by the second interviewer, who, out of the role play character, sternly said; '*No. No. Turn round. You're not supposed to face me! You're on the 'phone.*' I immediately turned away to face the wall, but felt extremely awkward conducting a conversation with someone in the same room, but not directly facing them. The disembodied features of this telephone conversation were however clearly an apt method of familiarisation with the way in which work was to be carried out in the Call Centre. Having completed the exercise, I was informed that the role-play was now over, and that the first interviewer, who had remained in the room but silent throughout, and the second

interviewer, would now leave me whilst they, I assumed, conferred about my performance.

Some time later I was then collected from the windowless room and taken to what was termed a 'Conference Room', which was identified by a number. I failed to take a note of the room number but I did notice that it was one of a number of identical rooms. The room, obviously booked in advance, conformed to a logistical plan, timetable and design which bore the imprint of the incessant meetings, conferences, discussions and negotiations that seemed to resonate throughout the building. The conference room was much larger than the windowless room. Its furniture, coordinated grey and dark blue, gave the impression of a corporate uniformity. The green Yucca plant, which was located between a waste paper bin and the beech veneer door, bore the label of a company who owned it, rented it to CallCentreCo. and revisited it onsite twice a week to water it and remove the dust from its leaves. A grey melamine table, neither rectangular nor circular, dominated the room. Square fluorescent overhead lights that combatted the grey flock chairs and dark blue carpet tiles lit the room. The room was bordered by large glass windows on one side, which formed the exterior of one side of the building. The glass was however treated to reduce glare and this gave the interior of the room a pale sepia quality.

I was welcomed into the room and informed that I had got the job and that the interview was a mere formality. The following interview consisted of the two interviewers relating their positive experiences within the organisation and, specifically, how good the organisation was to work for. The resounding sense of disconnection between my interview experience and my perception of the job role was further exacerbated when I discovered that, apparently, none of the experiences mentioned by the interviewers involved work in a call centre. It became immediately apparent that the introduction was, in a sense, an introduction to the company rather than the Call Centre; neither of the interviewers had worked in a call centre environment and, although the role-play attempted to mimic the role of a call centre worker, I felt overwhelming apprehension from my interview experience. On reflection, the way in which the organisation was depicted and experienced by the two relatively senior members of staff who interviewed me had very little to do with the role that I was about to undertake. My concerns must have been recognised however,

because I was encouraged to see the Call Centre as a 'stepping stone' into the more '*sexy*' areas of the business. Given my '*educational background*', (all quotes taken from notes made after the interview and later codified as part of the 'retrospective ethnography') I was encouraged to consider a job in CallCentreCo.'s consultancy division 'CallCentreCo. Consulting'. It was impressed upon me how the culture of the organisation would mean that I would be quickly able to move out of the Call Centre; the apparent assumption being that the job for which I had applied was not the job I wanted long-term. Nonetheless, the interview process, despite my reservations and difficulty with coping with some of the disconnecting aspects of the role-play, was concluded in a friendly and welcoming manner. I was provided with the distinct impression that I would not be at the Call Centre for very long. I was informed that the job offer would be confirmed in writing and that I would be given a start date at the earliest opportunity.

The ethnographic study took place within a specific area of CallCentreCo.'s business; to the employees this is known as the 'Call Centre' whilst management refer to it only as the 'service centre'. This distinction is important and indeed it is often cited as the reason why potential employees should work for CallCentreCo. rather than other similar competitor organisations. Implicit in this contested terminology is a fundamental disagreement between Capital and Labour over the scope and limits of the employment contract. Call centre operations are by no means a specialisation of CallCentreCo. They do however represent an area of significant growth for the business and a source of potentially high profitability. The organisation has been able to trade upon its professional reputation within the IT and management consultancy sector in securing lucrative contracts that are then serviced by the Call Centre operation. Whilst the consultancy arm of the business is very much distinct from the Call Centre operation, the corporate identity of the organisation is certainly a feature that the Call Centre management highlights to both prospective clients and employees. The Call Centre staff often reproduced the myth of a 'service centre'. I noted a number of occasions when staff would celebrate the organisation and revel in its apparent prestige.

> Matthew: ... *How does working here compare to working at other call centres?*

Mark: ... *well there's no comparison really, this is a service centre, so it's like much more skilled than just working in a call centre taking calls, I mean I feel like I really solve problems.*

(General discussion, recorded in fieldwork journal)

Matthew: ... *So have you worked at other call centres?*

Venkat: ... *no, but I know what they're like, and I'm really glad I'm here, I don't really think of it like a call centre... know what I mean?*

Matthew: ... *erm, no not really, can you explain a bit more?*

Venkat: ... *well you know, it's not like you're just taking incoming all day* (reference to taking incoming calls), *part of the job is that you have to be able to service the customer, y'know like sort their problems out and stuff, that's the difference...*

Matthew: ... *so you work harder than in other call centres?*

Venkat: ... (laughing) *some of us do!*

Matthew: ... *You're glad you work here then?*

Venkat: ... *deffo, I mean I'd never tell anyone I work in a call centre, I always say I work for CallCentreCo.*

Matthew: ... *the name is important then?*

Venkat: ... *Yeah it is, but it's like the prestige, you know, people think it's a good job.*

(Discussion with team problem manager,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

Lin: ... *I knew when I took this job it was going to be a good opportunity for me, I mean there are other things I could do, and I didn't really want to work in a call centre.*

Matthew: *So you would see this job as being different from working in a typical call centre?*

Lin: ... *ha I know what you're getting at, you think that this is like a call centre and we all think it's not, don't you?*

Matthew: ... *erm it's difficult, I mean some people insist that you call it a service centre... so the distinction must be important...* (Interrupted)

Lin: ... *really, who've you spoken to, I don't think many of us* (referring to CSRs*) really think that, it is a call centre, everyone knows that, 'tis only management that think it's a service centre*

Matthew: ... *But you said you didn't want to work in a call centre?*

Lin: ... *Yeah but you've got to look at the bigger picture, I want to work for CallCentreCo. just not in the Call Centre and I think this is a good way... you know... like a foot in the door.*

(Discussion with CSR trainee at lunch,
recorded in notebook, later recorded and edited in fieldwork journal)

The distinction between the Call Centre, or service centre, and the rest of the CallCentreCo. organisation was stark. The Call Centre was highly regulated, the shift patterning very tightly controlled, punctuality was seen as being particularly important and staff were often verbally disciplined for being late. The pay of Call Centre workers, whilst somewhat higher than other local call centres, was vastly lower than other staff within the organisation. In the most general of terms, conditions within the Call Centre were far less favourable than for those who worked in other areas of CallCentreCo's business. In the 13 months in which I worked in the Call Centre, I found that staff often romanticised about the possibility of being able to move out of the Call Centre and into other areas of the business. This 'careerism' was encouraged by the Call Centre management, who actively incorporated a discussion of wider corporate careers into the appraisal process, and as already outlined the initial recruitment process. Furthermore, the in-house company magazine, 'Cogitas', which all employees were encouraged to read, profiled a number of individuals who had made such moves, and subtly reported the 'glamour' of projects that lay beyond the confines of the Call Centre. The many graduates who worked in the Call Centre would often report that their time spent in the Call Centre was 'good work experience' and would help them to secure employment in other areas of the business. The idea of using the Call Centre as a way of moving into other areas of CallCentreCo. was an often repeated theme when talking to CSRs about their reasons for working within the Call Centre as typified in the following conversation:

Matthew: ... *So how long do you think you'll stay in the Call Centre for?*

Trish: ... *erm not long really, but it's just a means to an end*

Matthew: ... wha*t do you mean by that?*

Trish: ... *well the call centre is ok but really I want to move into something else*

Matthew: ... *right, so you're thinking about doing something different, what exactly?*

Trish: ... to *be honest I don't really know, I just don't want to be on the phones all the time, I mean I've got a degree I should be doing something different. I'd like to work on some of the big client projects they've got running, you know...*

Matthew: *What in the Call Centre? You mean like move to another team?*

Trish: ... *No,* (laughs) *I mean with CallCentreCo. but not in the Call Centre, like in consultancy or something like that, I've had two really good appraisals and I am hoping that they'll say to me they have an opening on the other side.*

(General discussion, recorded away from the Call Centre, recorded in notebook, later edited and transcribed to fieldwork journal)

Despite the publicity that the corporate message of progress received, in the time that I worked in the Call Centre, and even after I had conducted follow-up interviews, I was not aware of any individual who had been promoted out of the service centre and into other business areas. Indeed whilst CallCentreCo. celebrated the workings of its internal Labour market and the potential for self-improvement which this offered, it seemed that despite the hyperbole, Call Centre staff were effectively barred from taking part in this process as an internal memo (Appendix III) circulated to all staff revealed.

The service centre established by CallCentreCo. at Aston, Birmingham exists to provide IT support for clients rather than clients providing the service themselves. Significantly, although many of the Call Centre staff were graduates, they were not IT professionals, merely generalists. The general status of Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) is reflected in the average pay of Call Centre staff, although this is considered to be in excess of what a worker could expect from a standard call centre, it is still significantly less than the National average income. For staff

employed on temporary contacts there was an hourly wage of five pounds fifty pence per hour. There was no sick pay, pension right or statutory entitlement to leave for these workers. Whilst I was working in the Call Centre, the ratio of temporary to permanent staff was around 60:40, although it was claimed that the Call Centre had experienced periods when the amount of temporary staff in the service centre has been around 70 per cent. For permanent staff, rates of pay were somewhat better: new staff could expect around twelve and a half thousand pounds a year with rises being linked to appraisal and review procedures. Official policy stated that it was an 'sackable offence' to 'know' what someone else in the service centre was paid. The absence of any union representation meant that wage negotiations were carried out between the individual members of staff and the HR Manager and Team Leader. Whilst this system has been successful in keeping wages at a minimum, it has led to wide variations in pay for work of similar value. Rumour of pay raises and one off 'bonuses' were a persistent source of resentment within the Call Centre, whilst officially pay is determined within the remit of the appraisal process, the general consensus among CSRs seemed to be that pay was largely, at least within certain parameters, a matter of personal patronage.

Career Progression

Despite the initial appetite and enthusiasm for career progression that meets new Call Centre employees, progression within and from the Call Centre, to other areas of the business seemed intensely difficult. The high levels of staff turnover within the Call Centre meant that staffing levels were always lower than necessary. The lack of adequate staffing resulted in restrictions on movements out of the Call Centre. CallCentreCo. has for a number of years operated a very successful internal Labour market; the organisation trumpeted this as a possible route for progress for all staff and opportunities in the form of internal job adverts were publicised to all staff via email and company notice boards. The high level of turnover within the Call Centre however ensured that that the Call Centre management team, whose consent to a move was required, effectively blocked any potential moves away from the Call Centre. Thus the only option for CSRs in terms of progression within the organisation was promotion within the Call Centre. The Call Centre exhibited a relatively flat hierarchy. Work was organised in teams; a team leader, assisted by a

problem manager, led an individual team. The position of team leader normally reflected experience of over 5 years within the Call Centre, or similar experience with the wider call centre industry. The post of a team leader would be a full time position and would include a permanent contact and two thousand five hundred pounds per annum above the basic Call Centre wage. The position of problem manager also reflected experience within the Call Centre and problem managers were often senior CSRs. The role of problem manager offered no further financial reward although the grade was seen as important to both the Call Centre management team and the CSRs in general. Problem managers, as the name suggests, were often required to handle 'problem issues' such as complaints, reports and difficult clients. Problem Mangers exercised some degree of autonomy over their own working patterns and were generally thought to be less monitored than other CSRs, having already demonstrated their commitment to the organisation by achieving the status of senior CSR in time-served fashion. Problem managers were also invested with a degree of authority granted via the individual team leader and as such they were often placed in a pseudo-supervisory position *vis à vis* other CSRs.

Despite the lack of financial reward the increased status that accompanied the role of the problem manager meant that the position was highly sought after amongst the more aspiring CSRs. The number of problem managers within a team would depend upon the size of the team, but I estimated that the ratio of problem managers to CSRs was no greater than 1:5. In discussing career objectives with CSRs the role of the problem manager was nearly always identified as being desirable and attainable; despite this during the duration of the fieldwork the existing complement of problem mangers remained stable with only two additions from the general CSR pool. In contrast, promotion to the role of team leader was seen as virtually impossible:

Lizzy: ... *sure, problem manager, I think I could do that, yeah I'd like to think that it's all for something ... perhaps in a couple of months they'll give me a go.*

Matthew: ... *What about team leader, could you do that?*

Lizzy: ... *They don't really promote to team leader ... look around you, Tina* (team leader) *has been here for like over 10 years! There is no way I'll be here for that long.*

(One-to-one discussion at desk,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

06

Doing the Job

Introduction

This chapter outlined the process of starting work within the call centre. An extended ethnographic exploration of the first working day is outline to highlight the key features of the contemporary experience of call centre employment. Particular attention is paid to the sensuous impact upon the individual work when entering the workplace, details, which are often, omitted from other call centre studies but yet which all call centre employees seem to be able to identify with. These details are explored not only to produce and authentic ethnographic account but to attempt to highlight many of the informal and self-disciplinary processes that many new employees enact when starting work. The team-based context is explored and attention is paid to formal and informal skill acquisition that takes place as workers learn the job. The importance of the team is emphasised and comparison are draw between team-based training and more formal company based training.

Starting Work

My formal job offer included details of my start date and where and to whom I was to report for duty. On arriving at 9.30 a.m., the appointed time, I reported to the reception area of CallCentreCo.'s facility at Aston in Birmingham. The Call Centre is located within a larger facility at Aston Cross, roughly 2 miles east of Birmingham city centre. The facility was built in the late 1980s on reclaimed industrial land; the location of the Call Centre is symbolic in the sense that it was built largely to provide IT services to industry, but in contrast to many IT companies who have in the past preferred to develop greenfield sites, CallCentreCo., in response to changing government directives, chose to reclaim existing industrial land. The area surrounding the CallCentreCo. building still retains a largely industrial character and is dominated by the large HP Sauce factory that stands across the Aston Cross monument. On first arrival the facility consisted of a large rectangular 3 story building, located at the northern edge of the site I estimated to be approximately half a mile square. A second building, which was joined to the first at the north-eastern corner, but running south, was under construction. The building itself occupies only part of the site, the remaining land being used as a car park for the Call Centre staff. The layout of the site and the way in which it is used stands in contrast to the existing

surrounding industrial units that were mostly rebuilt after the Second World War. Many of these units around Aston Cross are home to small businesses, many built before the advent of mass use of cars and, as a result, on-street parking around the area is endemic. The first CallCentreCo. building is largely anonymous, if bigger than the surrounding buildings; it has brick exterior with red facia, its windows are darkened. Whilst the CallCentreCo. logo is present on the outside of the building it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell exactly what goes on inside from the outside. The darkened windows are vaguely suggestive of high-tech industry. This again stands in stark contrast to many of the surrounding industrial units that proclaim the nature of the business alongside the owner's name in bold livery. The CallCentreCo. facility was still under development and in the 13 months that I was there, work was completed upon a second building that was used to house the entire Call Centre.

The reception area was quiet, I later learned that most of the staff start work at 8.30 a.m.; this was usual. The reception area was staffed by security guards who sat behind a large imposing desk. I was given a badge to wear, which identified me as a visitor to the organisation, and I was told that this must be worn at all times. I was then told that someone would come to collect me and take me to the Customer Service Centre. My new team leader, Tina, collected me sometime later and took me to the second floor of the facility. We passed through security doors, which were accessed via a swipe card system. Overt security measures such as the swipe card seemed to fit into an environment in which every movement appeared to be silently monitored by passive CCTV remote cameras and a panoply of electronic systems. On entering the Customer Service Centre, or what will be termed the Call Centre, I was given a quick tour of the second floor, which was devoted entirely to Call Centre operations. A narrow corridor roughly 10 metres long, flanked by toilets and a kitchen to the left and a cloakroom and small meeting room to the right, led to the Call Centre. From the narrow corridor, the Call Centre opened out into an open-plan L-shaped office. The top of the 'L' was approximately 20 metres wide and a small walkway ran the length of the 'L'; either side of the walkway there were clustered groups of desks which, although designed to accommodate an individual, effortlessly flowed into the next personal workspace along a gentle parabolic curve. The resultant effect was that the desks arranged within a cluster merged seamlessly into one. The door behind me through which I entered was the only entry or exit point for the Call Centre apart from

a number of emergency exits. My immediate observation was that, from my position standing at the head of the office, I could see all of the desks and whilst they were divided by small partitions, these partitions were only at lower-chest height whilst standing and at head-level height whilst sitting down. From almost any position in the Call Centre therefore it was immediately clear if people were standing at their desks. Those that did stand immediately drew attention to themselves. I was ushered to the desks of the Call Centre manager, the HR manager and the technical services manager. I understood that these were the senior staff of the Call Centre and their position at the head of the Call Centre hierarchy was replicated in their physical location at the head of the office. Although not at their desks at the time, from the position of the empty chair and desk it was clear that they sat with their backs to the wall (unusual in a call centre) and, if stood, had a complete panoramic view of the entire Call Centre. The desks of the Call Centre managers appeared the same as the desks of other Call Centre staff. Dominated by a beige computer terminal, keyboard and monitor, their desks also had a telephone system and seemed bedecked with paper, reports files, company memos and a few personal items. Although I did not meet the Call Centre managers in person on my first day, I would over the next 13 months come to know them well.

The majority of staff working in the Call Centre were engaged directly with making and receiving telephone calls. The work was organised into teams and represented a very simple division of Labour. Physically the space that a team occupied was marked by a cluster of desks and although the integrated nature of the telephony and computer systems made the need for teams to work in the same space redundant, it became clear, in the course of the fieldwork, how protective teams became about what they saw as 'their team's space'; space on the floor of the Call Centre was therefore occupied and not given away without a considerable fight. It was custom within the Call Centre for team members normally to work within defined physical areas, but this lack of permanent physical boundary provides a clue to the robustness of the teamwork assumption that pervaded much of the Call Centre workers' perception of their employment. The workspaces of the Call Centre staff were almost identical, positioned along a parabolic curve from the team leaders' position; personal space is limited and visibility is high. As with the Call Centre managers, computer paraphernalia and a telephone system dominate the desks of Call Centre staff,

however on closer inspection there were a number of key differences between the desks of the managers and the staff, the most notable feature being the restricted personal space of the general Call Centre staff and the lack of personal items which on their desks.

Initial Perceptions: Confusion and Disorientation

On first arrival at the Call Centre, the volume of noise generated by the incessant chatter of over a hundred people talking on the telephone was almost overwhelming and made concentration on specific conversation difficult. The sensation was not one of overwhelming volume however, but of sensory overload. It seemed as though there were a hundred conversations all going on at once, all vaguely audible. A natural tendency toward listening in resulted in a confusion of fractured monologues. The sensation of sensory overload quickly subsided and during my first month within the Call Centre it became possible to tune into many of the conversations that were taking place with more speed. Crucially however, when tuning into a conversation it is only ever possible to hear the part played by the CSR. The customer is never heard; this means that the process of decoding conversations is made more difficult. As well as developing the ability to tune into conversations, an equally important aspect of Call Centre work was the ability to 'fade out' conversations and to focus upon either a specific conversation with a customer or a general task. The ability to force irrelevant dialogue and noise into the background in this way was clearly a required attribute of working in the Call Centre.

The walking tour of the Call Centre was completed in under 10 minutes. I was shown the various working clusters and informed as to their functions, mostly in terms of which external client they notionally reported to, so for example, I was introduced to the 'RailCo Desk', 'InsuranceCo Desk', 'BankCo Desk' and the 'TrainCo Desk'. A brief explanation of the main activities of the desk was provided but this information hardly registered. My initial impression of the Call Centre was an abundant feeling of impersonality; most of the people I was introduced to were actively engaged on calls and as a result there was very little communication with Call Centre workers except between Tina and myself. I was then escorted down the walkway, halfway down the length of the 'L', and told that this would be where I would be working on the

'NewsCo' service desk. I was introduced to Venkat, the 'Problem Manager', Rajesh and Jenny. The impersonal feeling was heightened due to the fact that, with so many conversations filling the atmosphere, it was difficult to tell exactly which fractured dialogue one was participating in; this led to a desire to simply withdraw from communicative activity altogether. The following dialogue demonstrates my confusion:

Tina: ...*ok lets introduce you to some of the team...*

Tina: ...*Matthew, ... this is Rajesh, ... Rajesh is the team problem manager*

Rajesh: [turns head away from screen, raises right hand in acknowledgement] *... Oh, yeah hi, how's it going down there....*

Matthew: *I'm ok thanks, lot to take..*

Rajesh: [Interrupts, adjust head position to face monitor] ...*no not really, I think it's sorted now, 'tho it did cause a few problems at Swindon..*

Tina: ... (directed to Matthew) *Oh he's on a call at the moment, sorry I didn't know, you can talk later.*

Matthew: ...*oh really, yeah I thought he was talking to me...*

(Reflections of first day, recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

The CSR quickly becomes accustomed to fragmented dialogue. CSRs between calls frequently engaged in discussion amongst themselves. Discussion however became fragmented, incoming calls were unpredictable and in response many conversations were cut short only to be resumed later as if no interruption had taken place.

Introductions to the rest of the team took the form of Tina pointing at a distance to members of staff, who responded by waving or smiling in acknowledgement. I was given a large A4 folder, which I was told contained company information, and a small white cardboard box, which contained an earpiece; this would link my ear to the telephone network. I was also shown to an empty desk which contained both a computer terminal and a phone console. Tina told me to sit at the desk and wait for Venkat to complete his call.

The seat was amazingly comfortable and I was immediately struck by how much the small desk partitions blocked out the rest of the Call Centre. From a seated position the partition provided me with restricted view; I could only see people who were standing at those desks that were some distance from my own. The partitions themselves were green and made of a soft material that allowed the partitions to be used as notice boards. The desks were distinctly minimal and all alike, each offered little space for anything other than the standard company-issued material. The desks, dominated by a large computer terminal, were marked by a small black plaque that identified the desk with a combination of letters and numbers, e,g. AF17. All desks were identical, small half shelves were used to support blue ring binders, but mostly the desks were empty of the usual paraphernalia save for yellow 'post-it' notes, which almost without exception bedecked every computer monitor. The notes themselves often made little sense and were encrypted, usually bearing numbers, which could have only made sense to the author.

I watched Venkat as he worked, alternating between serious work conversations and more informal chatter with the customer. He simultaneously manipulated his computer via both mouse and keyboard. The earpiece that he wore, attached via a headband, allowed him to use both of his hands while talking on the telephone. He uttered a few final words and his call was complete, ending his call by saying goodbye to the customer. I noted however that he still remained focused on the screen, continuing to input data into the computer using the keyboard and still wore his headset. Finally he entered a code onto the phone console, took off the headset from his head, placed it around his neck and turned his attention to me. Venkat went on to explain the role of the desk and, specifically, what I would be asked to do. My role as a helpdesk analyst involved manning a dedicated telephone line for the client, NewsCo. The client had recently implemented a major new computer software programme that had significantly restructured the way in which the business was organised and functioned. The new software had required major changes within the computer hardware environment in which NewsCo operated, and the role of CallCentreCo. was to act as an initial point of contact for reporting all problems relating to the new software and hardware. CallCentreCo. then, following a methodology developed in supporting other outsourced operations, had to collect and collate all details of the problems, store this information on a customised database and

then initiate an appropriate response in order to resolve the initial problem. The client NewsCo. has around 12,000 staff located at 20 locations around the UK. This small team at CallCentreCo. consisting of Tina, Venkat, Rajesh and Jenny were the sole point of contact for IT support for all NewsCo. staff. All computer problems, regardless of severity, were logged through the CallCentreCo. team. I was told that I could expect to deal with every type of computer problem, from difficulties with logging-on and printing, to wholesale system-wide failures. I would therefore be expected to deal with staff at all levels of seniority and computing experience. It would be up to myself or my colleagues to take down all relevant information. The fault would then be issued with a fault number so that all problems could be easily tracked. This would normally be the end of the initial contact with the user. Based upon existing knowledge and experience the Call Centre agent would then prioritise the call and initiate an appropriate response to resolve the reported issues. The responses initiated could range from contacting NewsCo.'s own support function to arrange for more training, or it could involve contacting a number of third party clients to report faults and problems as they arose. CallCentreCo. on logging the report of a fault, would manage the life cycle of the problem until resolution. This often meant that the helpdesk analysts would have to keep track of unresolved faults and actively seek their resolution through third party clients.

In order to become an active member of any team within the Call Centre, all new recruits were required to complete a period of training, which would notionally last for around four weeks. The training consisted of two elements. Firstly, structured technical training was provided centrally within the Call Centre; this aimed to ensure that all new recruits were given the generic technical skills needed within the Call Centre to be able to operate the various systems and procedures such as the telephone system and the computer database. Secondly, more specific client training was provided in a decentralised fashion and this training took place essentially within the team structure. Both types of training activities yielded useful ethnographic data in terms of the general research question.

Induction

As discussed above, the role of the CSR within the Call Centre was to facilitate the resolution of client IT problems by recording accurate information pertaining to the fault, prioritising faults, initiating appropriate responses and monitoring the situation until resolution. In order to become a 'skilled' CSR my training was divided into two sections. Initially I had to learn the so called 'life cycle' of IT problems, how they arose, the appropriate information to solicit from the client, how to prioritise between faults and which responses would lead to resolution and distribute information in pursuit of resolution. This problem cycle was not specific to the client, but appeared to be a general set of procedures which had been developed by CallCentreCo. as a generic way in which outsourced IT support is most effectively delivered. These procedures were however fairly specific to the CallCentreCo. Call Centre, and would not have been immediately transferable to other call centres. Many of the CSRs that I spoke to reported that they found the process of becoming familiar with the internal procedures the most difficult aspect of their work. It was also widely reported that the complexity of the database software used to report and record faults IT faults was more difficult to learn than comparable software at other call centres. The second aspect of my formal training involved learning the specific requirements of the client. All CSRs were expected to become competent with both aspects of the job within a period of one month of starting work. The formal aspects of training involved highly structured training sessions with a designated 'trainer,' but also less structured learning activities which often took place within the team format and involved 'live' calls from customers.

In the Call Centre, the training that was provided had two main functions: the first of which was to bring the Call Centre agent up to speed on the job that he/she would be doing. Primarily this focussed upon the Call Centre agent having an operational knowledge of the telephone system, the integrated computer system and standard operating procedures. This training was highly structured, formalised and delivered by CallCentreCo. trainers. The second and perhaps more implicit function of the training programme, maintaining the themes that I witnessed at my interview, was to establish in the mind of the Call Centre worker various career paths that were open to him/her. Formal training within CallCentreCo. drew extensively on preconceived notions of the kinds of business that the company was engaged in, for example whilst the agents worked within the Call Centre, all agents would be aware that the company

was involved in consultancy activities on a global scale, and this kind of employment was idealised as being sophisticated, well paid, stimulating and challenging. In effect, the wider operational aspects of the organisation were painted to be everything that work in a call centre was not. This type of training was rationalised by the Call Centre management staff as being part of a *'wider induction to CallCentreCo.'*. (Call Centre Co. company trainer, noted in training session and later recorded in fieldwork journal).

Over the initial four weeks of employment CSRs, are introduced to the Call Centre, the team and given direction on how to become proficient as a CSR. Training is varied; new employees receive a formal 'induction' to the company and the Call Centre, provided by specialised company trainers. This mostly involved the communication of the company's positions, its strategic aims and how the Call Centre fitted into the rest of the organisation. In common with my experience at CallCentreCo.'s head office the emphasis of these training sessions seemed to be the global reach and importance of the organisation, but in contrast the induction sessions seemed to aim to reassure CSRs of their place within a vast corporate web. In conversation with some of the other inductees I learned that this particular organisation was a sought after placement for temporary employees, as CallCentreCo. had a good track record of making temporary contracts permanent. It was also suggested that the possibility of moving into more glamorous areas of the organisation was high, and that the Call Centre was used, in effect, to vet new employees as to their suitability for joining the organisation. The introduction to CallCentreCo., global corporate monolith, was juxtaposed against an introduction to the Call Centre that primarily involved the communication of Call Centre policies and protocols. These policies provided the background for all issues of performance and control within the Call Centre and for purposes of comprehensiveness they are included in Appendix IV verbatim.

The introduction to the Call Centre policies was well rehearsed and my impression was that all new employees would be subject to the same 'training' in respect of the Call Centre policies. An in-depth familiarisation of these policies became the focus of a structured introduction to the Call Centre which was conducted over 3 mornings in a training room which was located outside the Call Centre but still within the main

Aston site. Most of my initial four weeks in the Call Centre was however taken up with becoming familiar with the procedure for logging and resolving client IT calls. In order to learn how to do this effectively I was sent on a training course to learn how use the telephone unit in conjunction with the computer database application. I joined other 'new starters' on this course from other teams and the course provided a generic introduction to the logging of client faults. This training again took place away from the Call Centre but on the Aston site. A training room had been designed to recreate the Call Centre environment. Each trainee was assigned a desk, computer and phone unit. The training focused upon the database software and it quickly became apparent that the database provided the structure around which work in the Call Centre was based.

The database required fields to be completed in sequence, for example when logging a call the CSR would have to find out information about who was logging the call, their location etc. The information would have to be input into the computer whilst the CSR was still on the phone to the client. The information that was then required would be context dependant, so that the agent had to learn to acquire accurate information from the client at all times. The amount of information that was required was immense; I calculated that an average call would require the Call Centre agent to solicit over 40 separate pieces of information from the client. Rather than the Call Centre agent learning specifically what information was required, the trainees were encouraged to follow the database in directing the flow of information; for example rather than know how, and where the information was required in a certain sequence, the agent was encouraged to 'complete the next field' as offered by the computer database. This was achieved by the CSR inputting data into the database and then allowing the computer to move onto the next empty field, thus prompting the CSR to acquire the correct information from the client. In this sense the database provided a scripting mechanism that specified the order in which Call Centre agents sought to acquire information, thus determining the structure of customer interactions. The gathering of information from clients and the collation of information using the database become the focal point of training. The training course provided a brief overview and introduction to using both the telephone and computer database systems simultaneously.

As well as providing instruction on how to use the database system, the training sessions provided practical guidance in terms of a number of possible customer-based scenarios. The trainers all had experience of working within the Call Centre and demonstrated their experience to the trainees by recounting various anecdotal stories relating to the Call Centre. Despite the practical aspects of the training, a number of trainees held reservations relating to their ability to act in the proper sequence given the complexity of the client interaction:

Mel: ... *erm... yeah, I understand.*

Trainer: ... *are you sure, you don't sound certain. Remember you'll be doing this for real next week.*

Mel: ... *I just... er.. it's difficult to.. I mean how do you, how do you remember what comes next, what happens if I put the wrong thing in?*

Trainer: ... *you don't have to remember what comes next, just follow the cursor*

Mel: ... *what happens if I get muddled y'know make a mistake?*

Trainer: ... *Don't worry just follow the system, you'll be fine.*

(CSR and trainer interaction,
observed during training session,
recorded in notebook and later transferred to fieldwork journal)

Although many trainees expressed concerns about the degree to which they felt confident about the prospect of their ability to deal with the work as set out in procedures, very few CSRs reported problems learning how to operate the systems to the trainers. Despite having previous computing experience and also working in customer services I found the need to use the computer at the same time as talking on the phone a demanding task. I also noted that the responses to the difficulty of training were distinctly gendered. As the interaction above shows, trainers often adopted a caring disposition to female CSRs, male CSRs who experienced difficulties seemed to adopt a more aggressive attitude reflecting the trainers who adopted a more 'macho' style when dealing with questions from male CSRs:

Matthew: ... *Marc, did you get all that?*

Marc: … *you must be joking…. all that* (database) *shit goes straight over my head.*

Matthew: … *yeah I know what you mean, it's difficult to take it all in, I find it very confusing…*

Marc: … *I'll just talk to them anyway* (interrupted)

Matthew: … *what do you mean, 'talk to them', you mean the client?*

Marc:… *yeah you know ... to buy yourself more time, keep them, y'know ... talking, that'll give me more time.*

(One-to-one discussion during training session,
recorded in notebook
edited and transferred to fieldwork journal)

Matthew: … *you know what Lisa, I really don't think I'm getting this at all.*

Liz: … (laughing) *I know, I was talking to the other Liz from the TrainCo desk and she said you never really get to know everything, like what to do in all situations, I think a lot of 'em just make it up.*

Matthew: … *I guess so...*

Liz: … *that's ok as long as you can get away with it though, I don't think I can, it worries me, what's it going to be like and all that. I'm dreading doin' it for real.*

(One-to-one discussion during training session,
recorded in notebook
edited and transferred to fieldwork journal)

A key concern for the trainees seemed to be the potential for having to deal with what was termed 'awkward' customers or clients. A number of stories had begun to circulate amongst the trainees about customer interactions that had included verbal abuse or the threat of physical violence. Despite the clear angst of a number of the trainees on this issue the trainers seemed unwilling or unable to discuss possible strategies in response to such calls.

Helen: ... *I just wanted to ask what we should do if we get an awkward one?*
(Referring to a potential abusive client)
Trainer: ... *well, you should just try and be as helpful as possible, you know like get all the information you need and end the call as quickly as you can*
Jim: ...*I've heard that sometimes you get an earful, is that right?*
Trainer: ... *well sometime people get upset, but it's not personal, don't let it affect you, just do your job.*

(CSR and trainer interaction,
observed during training session,
recorded in notebook and later transferred to fieldwork journal)

As a counter to the lack of clear support from trainers, the trainees resolved to offer support to each other if such circumstances arose. The following discussion took place away from the training room on a coffee break with most of the trainees present.

Jim: ... *I don't really think it's right that we should be expected to take calls if we're getting abuse.*
Nicky: ... *I don't think it's like that really, I mean when we start like, I've worked in other call centres and there is no way you'd have to put up with things like that, I think as long as the staff stick together we'll be ok ... I don't think they* (referring to the trainers) *really know what it's like on the desks.*

After both the formal induction to the Call Centre and the systems training was completed, I was then trained exclusively by members of my new team. In the first instance the training took the form of an orientation to the telephone system, the computer software and standard procedures. The training methodology employed was for me to shadow a colleague and I was allowed to listen to their telephone calls to see how they dealt with various enquiries. The period of shadowing a colleague lasted for approximately two weeks. 'Sitting with Nelly' has proven to be an effective training technique for the acquisition of a number of skills and abilities required to complete routine tasks. The tasks which were carried out by Call Centre agents can often be highly complex and involve human and computer interaction and

the training attempted to break these tasks down into a very simple routine structure. For example, on answering a telephone call the CSR would have a pre-prepared script which would detail exactly what the opening lines of the interaction would be. The agent would then follow a flow diagram, which would detail appropriate responses to questions, enquiries, and requests that were received. However, each interaction had to be recorded by the agent in a meticulous fashion and appropriate data placed onto the database whilst the call was in progress. The interrogation and manipulation of this database was the key skill that defined the ability of the Call Centre agent to function efficiently. The database was extremely complex in nature and familiarisation was a difficult task. Whilst the database was used for standard procedures, it also had to be relevant to non-standard enquiries and therefore the complexity of the database increased exponentially. Initially I found interaction with the database bewilderingly difficult. Often the CSR would need to extract information from the database whilst conducting an interaction on the telephone with the customer or client. I found the need to function at different levels simultaneously very demanding and I made a number of mistakes that were deemed to be of a routine nature by other team members and put down to my inexperience. In order to correct these mistakes it was suggested that I had not learned the work routines sufficiently and that I should think about the routines whilst not working, to ensure that they were always at the forefront in my mind. It was also suggested to me that if I could try to plan ahead whilst taking a customer call, I could '*win [myself] more time to play with later*' (advice given by Rajesh, team colleague, recorded in fieldwork journal). Of the 13 months that I spent in the Call Centre the two weeks after my initial introduction were by far the most demanding. I found the complexity and the sheer apparent randomness of tasks often very difficult to comprehend. I was not alone; a number of staff that had attended the training left the organisation around this point. One of the trainees who left, Liz, maintained close links with the Call Centre through mutual friends and I was able to talk to her about her experiences later and in an off-site location:

> Matthew: ... *So tell me about the events that led up to you leaving.*
> Liz: ... *Well I enjoyed the training, although it was tough, but it was just like they said 'that's it now, out you go' ... and you feel like 'shit, it's me who's*

answering the calls', I just didn't know what to do or what to say, I felt really stupid.

Matthew: *... didn't the people you were working with help you?*

Liz: *... Yeah yeah, don't get me wrong, they were great, really nice people but there are only so many times you can ask someone the same thing without feeling really dumb, in the end I thought, this just wasn't worth it.*

(One-to-one conversation during social evening, recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

Through informal discussions with colleagues I was able to ascertain that generally the initial period of employment within the Call Centre is considered the most demanding. I was told that often it was *'touch and go'* (General discussion with Tina, recorded in fieldwork journal) as to whether new recruits would make it through their initial training period. In some respect this seems to explain why little attempt is generally made by established staff to get to know temporary staff. Furthermore I learnt that whilst other call centres were not considered as 'tough' in terms of becoming proficient, high turnover especially of new staff was common. I was able to discuss the transition from training to work with the Call Centre manager:

Matthew: *... it seems that the transition from training to working can be really stressfull.*

Amanda: *... yeah I know, it is difficult to get the balance right but I do think that you really need to be a certain 'kind' of person to do the job well, you have to be fairly tough.*

Matthew: *... To deal with difficult calls?*

Amanda: *... That's one aspect of the job, but it's better if staff find out early that the service centre is not for them, rather than later.*

The response from the Call Centre manager illustrates how the transition from training to working within the CallCentreCo. Call Centre effectively constitutes a continuing recruitment process. The initial 'shock' of being thrust into taking calls in the Call Centre can be somewhat overwhelming, and it appears that the Call Centre

managers use this as a method for assessing the strength of new employees. Little is done to mitigate the stressfulness of this situation by the Call Centre management team.

Although, like Liz, I contemplated withdrawing from the Call Centre, I felt great support from my colleagues within the team. Although Liz reports that she also felt this support I was constantly encouraged and my mistakes and errors were made good by other team members and was constantly reassured that the situation would improve as I became more proficient and experienced; this reassurance was vitally important. The constant repetition and reinforcement of the daily Call Centre routine did mean that, like other new recruits, I was able to come to terms with the daily demands of working in the Call Centre. Although, even after a year of working on the same team I never really felt totally proficient and the randomness of the calls at times meant that I felt unsure about the correct procedures to follow. I suspect that this was the same for many CSRs.

Learning the Job

Essentially then, the job for which I had been recruited consisted of a number of key elements. Firstly, CSRs were required to collect and organise information pertaining to the computer failures that happened at a number of remote client sites. Based upon experience, protocol and procedure, the Call Centre agent would then initiate and co-ordinate an appropriate response to attempt to resolve the problem. Once the response had been initiated, the Call Centre agent was then required to monitor the response to resolution. This, I was told, could take a relatively short time, for example less than an hour, or could last several weeks in the case of major problems that required extensive technical work. Although this might appear a relatively straightforward task, the complexity of the job was often heightened due to the environment in which the client worked. The multi-site location meant that there was a degree of autonomy between sites and thus often the IT systems and procedures would be different, depending where the problem arose. Furthermore the vast size of the client organisation encompassed an enormous variety of systems and hardware; often these originated from different providers. The Call Centre staff needed to have a working knowledge of all the systems that were used at the different sites and also

their potential problems and appropriate responses in the face of such problems. The amount of information required to do this effectively was massive.

The CSRs at CallCentreCo. were provided with various equipment in order to make their jobs possible. Each member of staff worked at a computer terminal. The terminal was not specific to the employee but was part of the company's call centre facilities. On starting work at the Call Centre, each employee would be issued with a 'log-on I.D.' and a 'password'. The computers were protected against unauthorised use by this log-on and password system. Until an authorised log-on and password had been entered the computer terminal remained non-functional. Upon logging onto the system, the user was given access to the central computer system, which contained a variety of tools and resources that were needed to carry out the job effectively. The main computer application and resource that was used by the call centre staff was an extensive propriety software database. This programme was based upon Microsoft's Access database system and was specifically designed by CallCentreCo. to be used as a tool for recording and responding to customer calls in a call centre environment. The database could be accessed once a CSR had logged onto the central computer system. The database allowed for the depositing of information within a central repository, the review and amending of that data by anyone with authorised access at a later date. The architecture of the database effectively determined the way in which Call Centre staff worked and indirectly influenced customer interactions.

The majority of communication between the Call Centre and the client took place over the telephone. Staff were issued with their own personal telephone headset. This consisted of an over-the-head adjustable headband which secured the headset, the sound of the call or audio was produced by one earpiece with a ear cushion made of foam. Differing from headphones, the headset had only one earpiece that allowed the CSRs to hear the customer but also to be aware of communication from within the office. The headset was also equipped with a clear 'voice tube' which was fitted to the adjustable earpiece but which protruded out and was intended to be worn in front of the mouth when engaged on a call. The voice tube picked up acoustic vibrations as the CSR spoke and encoded them electronically and transmitted them digitally into the phone system. The headset was extremely lightweight although some staff complained that the headband style was uncomfortable at first. Whist working the

CSR would wear the telephone headset, and this would be fitted with a standard phone socket and connected to a telephone base unit or console.

The telephone unit resembled a residential telephone in that the numbers were arranged in the familiar format of three columns of four buttons, however the buttons were slightly larger than would be found on a standard residential telephone set. The phone console also had a large display that illuminated the current telephone status, telephone number of incoming calls, call duration and other information. However perhaps the key distinguishing feature of the telephone base unit was a row of large buttons to the right of the standard numeric buttons. These buttons were 'dial / answer', 'end call' 'wrap-up', 'mute', 'sign on' and 'sign off'. On starting work the CSR would have to activate the telephone line by 'signing on' with a 'user name' and 'password.' This information needed to be input using the keypad, so the user name and password were restricted to numerical characters only. In practice however both the user name and password were set as default to the extension number of the phone unit so that each CSR would be able to work from any base unit. Once logged onto the phone system the CSR was able to make and receive calls. To make an outgoing call the CSR would simply have to dial '9' to access an external line and then the national number they required and hit the dial key. The process for incoming calls was slightly different. Firstly it was possible to call a specific extension in the call centre and this would be done by dialling the call centre number followed by the appropriate extension number. However CSRs would seldom give out their direct number and indeed this was often advised against in the call centre as a matter of procedure. To ensure however that the right call got through to the right team, each client of the CallCentreCo. Call Centre was issued a different number. There was therefore no number for the Call Centre *per se* but rather different numbers for the different teams. Similarly despite the fact that CSRs worked on the phone all day, they did not have their own personal telephone number whilst at the Call Centre, it was therefore almost impossible for the client to call a specific CSR. Clients therefore accessed their specific support team rather than the Call Centre in general.

Despite the existence of team-specific direct dial telephone numbers, all calls to the Call Centre are routed by 'Automatic Call Distribution' (ACD) software, which theoretically distributes calls evenly across and within the team structure, thus

ensuring that all CSRs are allocated a similar number of calls. Once a CSR is logged onto the phone system ACD will start to direct calls to the CSR. Once logged onto the system the flow of calls, and thus work, is directed by ACD and the CSR cannot exert any control over this, the only way to stop the system directing calls to the CSR is for them to change their phone status from 'ready'. If all CSRs in a team are engaged on calls, the software will keep any incoming calls on hold. This is familiar to customers of call centres as being held in a 'queue'. The CSR is able to change his or her status. If a CSR has a status other than ready, ACD will not distribute calls to that specific CSR. The CSR logs off the system at the end of the working day; this would be done by pressing the 'sign off' key. The telephone base unit would then ask for a code depending upon why the CSR was logging off. There were codes for home, lunch, break, training and meeting. Whilst 'signed off,' ACD would not direct any calls to the CSR. The impersonal nature of ACD did provide the distribution of work with a perception of equity, for example, in a team environment where three members of staff might be available to take a call, I was told that ACD measures the time that all the CSRs have been off the phone and will direct the call to the CSR who has been available for the longest. The perception of equality was clearly important within the team and it was stressed by Tina, the team leader, on several occasions within the first two weeks of my starting work in the Call Centre. The implicit assumption within both the team and the Call Centre in general is that the pace of work and amount of work is regulated by computer and is therefore fair for all staff. Once a call has been allocated or directed to a CSR by ACD, the phone base unit will ring to alert the CSR and the display will highlight the number of the incoming call. The combination of both auditory and visual warning is deliberate, as too is the visibility of both these warnings, they are directed both at the individual who is taking the call and also the rest of the team; they signify the need to initiate another customer interaction.

Once the telephone has begun to ring there is no way for the CSR to redirect the call, other than to answer it and attempt to transfer the call to another CSR. Call transfer was, however, rarely practiced. Although it was never explicitly stated, the assumption of Call Centre staff was that all calls must be answered. As the ACD software directs the calls the system is therefore instrumental in determining the way in which Labour is utilised within the Call Centre. The sanitation provided by the depersonalised allocation of work tasks through the ACD system obscured the

hierarchical nature and allocative function of management and supervisory grades within the Call Centre. ACD was almost always seen as neutral, passive, fair and equitable by CSRs, yet its very existence is a manifestation of a broad inequality within the workplace. Whilst the ACD system was certainly a computerised system, it was very much controlled by the call centre management team as discussed with an infrastructure manager:

Matthew: ... *I wonder if you could tell me a bit more about the ACD system and what specifically you do?*

Peter: ... *The ACD System is our own exchange, I suppose you could say it is our own personal exchange system. What it does is it routes calls in a manner so you get calls coming in from BT, Cable and Wireless whatever, and we decide how to distribute those calls. Say for example that it comes in we would distribute it to a desk; or a variety of people that we put in a group, so they will recieve the calls fairly.*

Matthew: ... *So you tell the system who to allocate calls to?*

Peter: ... *Yeah, obviously, it's infinitely configurable, we can tell it who to send calls to, who not to send calls to, and in what ratio.*

Matthew: ... *So who decides how these things are worked out?*

Peter: ... *Me, er. I suppose ... but things are normally pretty standard, unless we get specific requests from a team leader to ease off or whatever.*

(Follow-up interview, tape recorded and later transcribed)

The discussion with Peter, the Infrastructure Manager, demonstrates how fragile the general equity assumption made by most CSRs is in reality. The discussion clearly indicated that the ACD system can be manipulated to carefully control the flow of work and suggests that differentiated workflows with respect to individual CSRs are clearly possible.

Within the Call Centre ACD plays the role equivalent to the production line within a factory and significantly is a key way in which the relationship between Capital and Labour is managed. The effective dehumanisation of the control of the Labour process reduced tensions between CSRs and managers within the Call Centre and

presented little scope or opportunity for CSRs to subvert the mechanics of the productive process. Pressure to answer calls as quickly as possible was exerted not only by supervisors and problem managers but also from other CSRs within the team. There was no question that a ringing phone had to be answered and indeed the expectation was often that this would be achieved before the second ring.

Venkat: ... *There is no reason not to answer calls quickly, I mean if a call comes through you must be on 'ready' status, that's what it means, you're ready! All you have to do is press a button and you're connected, you shouldn't really hear the phone ring to be honest, it should be just bang, call coming through and it's answered and you're away.*

(One-to-one discussion with Problem Manager
during team-based training,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

Matthew: ... *Do you ever think like, sod it, I'm not answering this one?*

Jenny: ... *You can't do that, not here.*

Matthew: ... *What you talking about? Of course you can, you just don't answer it.*

Jenny: ...*oh yeah (laughing) what happens then, it's like ringing and ringing and you're sitting there with your arms folded.*

Matthew: ... *Well you just wait for it to go away, like a missed call.*

Jenny: ... *A missed call, that's really bad, it means that NewsCo. have tried to contact us and they couldn't get through, the whole thing would fall down, why would you pay for a service that you can't use? ... And besides, listen* (motions to the rest of the Call Centre) *can you hear phones ringing and ringing?*

Matthew: ... *No, that's my point, all these phones and not much ringing there're all answered straight away.*

Jenny: ... *That's MY point, it would be totally out of character, it's just not what we do* (derisory shake of the head).

(General discussion in quite period,

recorded in fieldwork journal)

07

Workplace Control

Introduction

This section sets out to explore the systems of control deployed within the call centre. Specific attention is paid to culture control, this is explored through and analysis of the ways in which peer pressure was effectively deployed to secure organizational objectives, so for example (mis) use of wrap-up times was managed by questioning the competence of those who made us of wrap-up time. Furthermore this chapter investigates how psuedo-sexualised relationships were established by between team members and client workers, specifically the way in which these were mobilised by the team leader. Finally the role that organised social events played within the call centre is explored. Most call centre workers and managers highlighted the social aspect of the call centre as a significant feature of working in the call center with a majority identifying this as overwhelming positive. Ethnographic investigation reveals the importance of such social organization in terms of generating organizational cohesion as well as helping to further blur work/life boundaries.

Cultural Control

As outlined above, the technological character of ACD within this Call Centre provided an effective shroud to the actual Labour processes involved, with CSRs assuming that the process was both inevitable and equitable. Moreover, on occasion agents would express frustration against the structural arrangements of the Call Centre and this would often be directed this towards the ACD system. I witnessed the following expression of frustration vented toward the system:

> Rajesh: [finishing a call] ... *yeah o.k. don't worry we'll get onto it right away, I'll get back ... yeah I'll call you later...* [terminates call by selecting 'end call'] ... [phone immediately rings again whilst Rajesh is still entering data regarding previous call] ... *fuckin' 'ell give me a chance...* (Phone continues to ring)
>
> Venkat: ... *should 'ave gone in wrap-up, use your wrap-up* ... (Phone continues to ring)

Rajesh: ...*fuckin' piece of shite*...[bangs dial / answer button on phone unit with fist] ... [reverts to composure] ... *Good afternoon NewsCo. Service desk, Rajesh speaking how can I help you?*

(Observed customer / colleague interaction during busy period, recorded in fieldwork journal)

The interaction observed above illustrates a tension between the need for the CSR to initiate an appropriate response to the initial telephone call and the distribution of another call that also requires attention. In busy periods it would be common for the phone line to ring as soon as one interaction was completed. Despite the fact that the CSRs were required to interact with the client whilst at the same time manipulating the software database, time is provided, or allocated, for the CSR to finish off making notes, adding data to the database, or any other follow up work required after completion of the call. This time was 'protected' from incoming calls, and designated as 'wrap-up' time. In order to enter 'wrap-up' time, CSRs would have to terminate a call by pressing the 'wrap-up' key, they would then need to enter a code which reflected what they intended to do in the wrap-up time, these included categories such as: 'data entry' or 'research'. The contribution made by Venkat, the problem manager, in the observation above shows how, in theory, a CSR may be able to change their call status by selecting an appropriate wrap-up code on concluding the initial call. In practice, the use of wrap-up time to complete interactions was discouraged and, as in all highly routinised workplaces, CSRs would form a habit of ending all calls by returning to 'ready' status and thus effectively denying themselves the opportunity to complete any further work required by the previous call in wrap-up time.

The use of wrap-up time was a divisive issue in the Call Centre, to a great extent the use of such time was looked down upon and discouraged; it was seen as unnecessary in all but the most complex of calls. I heard on numerous occasions more senior staff criticise junior staff for extensive use of wrap-up time, it being suggested that more proficient workers would not require the use of wrap-up time to complete their work. Even in circumstances where wrap-up was seen as being legitimate, the actual time spent on wrap-up was small, for example, whilst I was in the Call Centre I received a memo that was published to all staff, which encouraged staff to reduce the average

time spent on wrap-up up from three to one and a half minutes. Although I was unable to acquire specific figures based upon my experience of working in the Call Centre, I would estimate that less than 10 per cent of all calls were followed with CSRs initiating wrap-up time. The pressure to avoid the use of wrap-up time was nowhere more intensely generated than from within one's own team. Within a small team setting such as the NewsCo. desk, the extended use of wrap-up time would almost certainly mean that the CSR who sat next to you would be directly affected. In this sense the use of wrap-up time within the team was thought to distort the workings of the ACD system. CSRs knew that if a team member was unavailable to take a call through being on wrap-up time, the call would be diverted elsewhere in the team. The pressure of conforming to a team ethic, which involved notions of *'pulling together'*, (Problem Manager, motivational statement during a busy period) and *'working as a team'* (Team leader, addressing the whole team following a customer complaint) was carefully arranged against individualist sentiment within the team and conferred on individuals either the label of *'team player'* or *'non-team player'*.

Venkat: ... *Ok today Matt, I'm going to put you with Jenny and you'll be taking some calls and closing down when you can.*

Matthew: ... *Ok great, sounds good.*

Venkat: ... *But Matt, listen; I don't want you picking up bad habits.*

Matthew: ... *What do you mean?*

Venkat: ...*well look, Jenny is great, but she's really lazy, so watch out! You can't be a team player if you're lazy can you?*

Matthew: ... *lazy? What do you mean?*

Venkat: ... *well she always goes into wrap-up even when she doesn't need to.*

Matthew: ... *oh I see but I thought you could go into wrap-up, she must have needed*...(interrupted)

Venkat: ... *Yeah you can, just not all the time, she does it on every call and makes sure all the stuff on the database... is like...y'know spelt right and stuff. You don't need to give a shit about that stuff, but remember if she's on wrap-up that means more calls for the rest of us, it really pisses Rajesh off, he thinks she's a lazy bitch, so don't be picking up those habits!*

(One-to-one discussion during initial team-based training,

recorded in notebook later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

The observation above came from within my first month working within the Call Centre. Over the full course of the ethnography I came to realise that within the limits and boundaries of the small team, Jenny was often rounded on as being less motivated to work hard than others on the team. As Venkat indicates in his instruction not to pick up bad habits, the consensus amongst the NewsCo. team CSRs was that Jenny had a propensity to make extensive use of wrap-up time and this was the cause of a degree of resentment among her direct colleagues. Sometime later I asked Jenny directly about her use of wrap-up time:

> Jenny: ... *Yeah I know they don't like it, that's because when I'm not taking calls, the calls are diverted to them* (giggles)
> Matthew: ... *They say some pretty nasty things about you, does it upset you?*
> Jenny: ... *Nah, they just want me to go from one call to another, but I'm not like them, I like to take my time and do it properly.*
> Matthew: ... *Do it properly? Do you mean filling in the database?*
> Jenny: ... *Yeah, I like to make sure everything is done, you know like I've got all the information right. Sometimes people have contacted me and I've had to refer to old calls, with stuff I've done it's easy, it makes sense, with their stuff they just put anything in, they don't really think about what they're doing.*

In terms of the monitoring of performance from the perspective of both the Call Centre management and the client, wrap-up time effectively constitutes dead, or non-productive time. Despite Jenny's defence of adopting a thorough approach, the preference was always to ensure that all necessary tasks to complete a specific call such as data entry were performed during the customer interaction, i.e. whilst the client was still on the phone. Without exception, CSRs reported in follow-up interviews and during discussions that the most important aspect of being able to work in the Call Centre was accuracy followed by speed. The combination of both of these skills enabled CSRs to ensure that information was taken with precision and stored promptly.

Initially, four members of staff manned the NewsCo. desk at CallCentreCo. The Call Centre however employed approximately 250 staff. The staff were distributed amongst a number of 'desks', teams or clusters. The sense of team identity felt strong within the Call Centre, individuals were bestowed with a sense of 'team' and in turn the construction of the team was invested with qualities related to the client for whom they provided a service. Teams were known by their clients, thus the NewsCo. Service Desk serviced the client NewsCo. The other desks included clients such as TrainCo., BankCo., TradeCo., LifeCo., InsuranceCo., ConsultingCo. and PowerCo. Whilst the specific function of each of the desks was slightly different, all the desks were involved with logging, organising, prioritising and resolving client IT problems. The closeness of the job tasks was illustrated by the way in which CSRs were able to move between desks with little extra transitional training. I found out later that the NewsCo. desk had only recently, prior to my recruitment, been created as a result of a successful contract tender between CallCentreCo. and NewsCo. All of my colleagues had worked on other desks before joining the NewsCo. desk. Within the Call Centre, the tools of the job on the various desks were exactly the same; the same headsets, computers and software were all used, and furthermore the procedures and protocols were also the same. This meant that the difference between the teams within the Call Centre was based upon the client. Although there was a degree of transferability between clients, it was a feature of employment within the Call Centre that helpdesk analysts became associated with particular clients.

On initial entry to the Call Centre, it was visually difficult to differentiate between teams. Whilst individuals were grouped or clustered around specific spatial locations within the office, the border between one team and another was not immediately clear. Conceptual differentiation between various teams was however ensured through the employment of a highly visible LED moving message sign. The moving message sign was housed in a black steel frame that measured approximately 1 metre long and 40 centimetres high; every team had one and they were housed on the exterior walls of the Call Centre immediately above the heads of the CSRs. The moving signs visualised information relating to the performance of the team. The information shown took the form of red, green and amber dot matrix typography and the device was capable of showing static information, scrolling information, flashing information or any combination of the three. Depending upon your position within

the Call Centre, the size of the display made it possible to see the signs for most of the teams from any location. The information presented on the moving display was drawn from the ACD system. A typical display would be constructed in a way depicted in Appendix V.

The moving electronic display provided an instant review of the performance of the team and the process of decoding the information it presented was a key aspect of my initial introduction to the Call Centre. The first category, 'Queued,' referred to the amount of client calls that were currently waiting to be answered. This was displayed in green dot matrix typography. The second category, 'Agt Free,' referred to the number of CSRs that were currently available to take calls. This, from a CSRs perspective, related to the telephone console status being set to 'ready'. If the CSR were currently at 'ready' status, ACD would direct calls to the CSR. This information was displayed in red dot matrix typography. The third category, 'Total,' reported the total number of calls that had been answered by the team over a specific reporting period. This was generally set to a default shift pattern; this tended to be from eight a.m. to six p.m. (Although most CSRs work from 8.30 to 5.30, there were also early shifts, 8.00 to 5.00, later shifts, 9.00 to 6.00 and 'out of hours shifts' for clients that required support through the night). The total number of calls taken was displayed in green dot matrix typography. The last category, 'G.O.S %,' was displayed in amber and related to a measure that was termed 'grade of service'. Grade of service was explained to me to be a measure of how good a team was at answering the phone, or more precisely how punctual. This was the generally accepted definition within the Call Centre and most CSRs in discussion reported that this was the most significant way in which the overall performance of the team was measured. It was well known within the Call Centre that different clients have different requirements in terms of grade of service. I was told for example that in terms of NewsCo. the client had negotiated for a grade of service of around ninety per cent. To the CSRs working on the desk, this meant that the 'G.O.S %' must be kept from falling below 90. Other desks however were subject to different parameters, for example the TrainsCo. desk was subject to a grade of service requirement of seventy percent whilst BankCo. demanded ninety five percent.

Whilst it was generally accepted that the 'G.O.S %' figure provided an accurate and impartial assessment of the teams performance, CSRs were less than clear about how exactly the figure was calculated, as my later discussion with a number of team members indicates:

> Matthew: ... *the grade of service figure, it's a percentage, what does it mean, what is it a percentage of?*
>
> Jenny: ... *errr, it's just about how fast you answer the phone, it's y'know, how many times it rings...*
>
> Matthew: ... *yeah but it's a percentage so how is it calculated?*
>
> Venkat: ... *look it don't matter, how, or why, or what, all that matters is that we keep the number above 90 and everyone is happy.*
>
> (Group discussion during quiet period, recorded in fieldwork journal)

From my discussion with team members, other Call Centre staff and team managers, I have still been unable to identify a satisfactory account of the calculation of the grade of service percentage figure. It is clear that the figure is influenced by the average number of rings that it takes for a call to be answered, however the figure is also significantly affected by the amount of incoming calls that are held in a queue and also the length of time that incoming calls are held in the queue. Therefore whilst CSRs seemed generally to accept the grade of service percentage as a reflection on their performance, its derivation was, at least in some part, not determined by their own personal performance but by the structural arrangements of the Call Centre. In an informal discussion, Rajesh told me about a time when he had been powerless to prevent a drop in the grade of service:

> Rajesh: ... *Tina had just left and it was really quiet, like all day I mean, then it was about half past five and the phone goes, and I'm thinking this is gonna be something big right, like I'm on me own yeah, you know how it is, shit happens. So it's Andy D. from Swindon, blah blah blah server this, server that, need to do this, call that... then I looked up as I'm talking and there were 7 calls in the fucking queue, I'm thinking shit, the grade of service...*

Matthew: ... *so the grade of service is falling because there are calls in the queue? ... so did you try and answer them?*

Rajesh: ... *No, see I know that they are related like, it had been a really quiet day so I knew they were all part of the same problem, so I went on wrap-up as soon as I'd finished talking to Andy ...*

Matthew: ... *you went on wrap up so you wouldn't have to take more calls?*

Rajesh: ... *yeah but it allowed me to get on and sort the Swindon problem out by contacting Saxon.* (Third party support agency)

Matthew: ... *were they* (Saxon) *able to sort the problem out?*

Rajesh: ... *I don't really remember to be honest, I just remember the calls in the queue and thinking, shit, I'm gonna get roasted by Tina tomorrow.*

(One-to-one discussion during late shift,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

The use of wrap-up time by Rajesh allowed for time to develop a response to the initial problem that was logged from Swindon. Rajesh demonstrated to me that he was aware that his actions would have implications for the grade of service figure but, although this was not part of the established desk protocol, Rajesh adopted a course of action to initiate a response as quickly as possible in order to resolve the problem, based on an assumption that the calls queued would be resolved by the resolution of the initial call from Swindon. Although I failed to ask how long ago this incident took place, it had clearly left a mental mark for Rajesh. The conflict he felt between answering the calls to get the queue down and being proactive to respond to the initial problem is a dilemma that many CSRs face. However, what is clear is that Rajesh had internalised the grade of service figure to the degree that he held *himself* responsible for the decline of the figure even though there were clearly not enough staff to answer all the calls in the queue. Even with a full team of five, two calls would have still remained unanswered thus affecting the downward movement of the grade of service figure.

The concern to keep the grade of service figure above ninety percent was well founded; a falling grade of service number indicated a failure to deal with the amount of incoming calls. Generally, it was accepted that the grade of service figure would

fluctuate, especially given that the desk could become quickly inundated by calls relating to major problems at a client's site. However, generally the grade of service had to be maintained as this was the key measure that the Call Centre management used to assess the general performance of a specific team. It was also the figure that the client would be most interested in, in terms of a general measure of performance. In particular Tina, the NewsCo. desk team leader, was especially preoccupied with the grade of service figure. I noted the following event in my fieldwork journal.

Tina [shouting] ... *oi, you lazy bastards, look at the grade of service figure! Get your fingers out ... Gen, stop chatting up Chris and answer some calls, Matt get off wrap-up you've been on there for 8 minutes...*
Jenny: [indignantly] ... *I'm not chatting anyone up, I'm closing down a call.*
Tina ... *Jen,* [exasperated] *I need you to answer calls, look at the queue! ... it's my head on the block up there* (points to Call Centre managers' desks) ...

(Team interaction observed during busy period,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

The grade of service figure therefore became the *de facto* way in which the performance of teams are measured. The capacity for an instant quantitative reflection of team performance promoted rivalry between teams within the Call Centre. Despite the allocation of a variety of grade of service requirements between different desks, teams often competed on their respective grade of service figures. These rivalries were often generated by the more senior Call Centre staff and often took on a personal slant.

Tina: ... [shouting across the Call Centre] *haha, look at InsuranceCo ... 45 percent grade of service ... just like the team leader ... bag of shit.*

(Observed inter-team interaction,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

The competitive imperative to be better than rival teams is of course a general benefit to the Call Centre in its overall objective to meet its contractual obligations that are expressed in the lexicon of grade of service. It is however difficult to assess the

degree to which serious competition existed between teams. From experience, all Call Centre staff were aware of the reasons why grade of service may fluctuate and the fact that many factors lay outside the control of individual CSRs meant that such competition remained part of light-hearted rivalry, in which CSRs engaged as a means of relieving the monotony of the Call Centre daily routine. However, the differentiation of desks on the basis of perception of grade of service did provide a more subtle controlling hegemonic influence. As Lizzy, a CSR who joined the NewsCo. desk sometime after I arrived illuminated:

> Matthew: ... *what was it like on your previous desk?*
>
> Lizzy: ... *it was manic, so, so busy, an' I tell you, it's not like this.*
>
> Matthew: ... *what do you mean?*
>
> Lizzy: ... *well for a start off Tina's sorted, y'know she don't care, you can do what yer want as long as the grade of service is ok. I like that, that's what's important.*
>
> Matthew: ... *so the other desk was, like, more strict?*
>
> Lizzy: ... *yeah I guess, in a way, but it was so busy, the phone was always ringing, like constantly, there were always calls in the queue so that's why the grade of service was so low...*
>
> Matthew: ... *sounds like they need more staff...*
>
> Lizzy: ... *yeah maybe, but I'm not bothered really, ... I'm really glad they put me here* (referring to NewsCo. team) *the grade of service is always really high and it make things, y'know, less hassle.*
>
> *(One-to-one discussion, recorded in fieldwork journal)*

The NewsCo. team that I was assigned to provided support from 8am to 6 pm. This was organised within the team by two members starting at 8am and finishing at 5pm, with another two team members starting at 9am and finishing at 6pm. The client had depots or distribution centres in most major cities across the UK. As a response to rapid loss of market share, NewsCo. had invested heavily in integrated computer technology to make the distribution of newsprint and magazines more efficient. The software had been installed at the client's head office and a phased rollout

programme was designed so that the software could be implemented at a new depot each month. The contract that CallCentreCo. negotiated was to provide helpdesk facilities in support of both the new software implementation programme and all other computer-related problems. The software was known as SAP R/3, and is common in many successful diversified production enterprises. The software has also recently started to be implemented into both public and voluntary sector organisations. The service that was provided by CallCentreCo. was known as 'log and refer;' in short this meant that employees of the client who experienced IT difficulties on-site would contact the helpdesk with details of the problem, which would be logged during the interaction with the CSR. Whilst the primary function of the CallCentreCo. helpdesk was to support the SAP programme, the helpdesk also provided support for other software and hardware problems.

With my training complete, I was allowed to take telephone calls, set priorities and initiate responses at my own discretion. Part of the training also involved recognition of the hierarchy of the client's organisation. Indeed as the relationship between the client and CallCentreCo. progressed, the CSR would become more familiar with the employees of the client. Whilst ostensibly the CSRs' attitudes to the client's employees had to be uniform, it was inevitable that some clients were preferred to others. A particularly disliked employee of NewsCo. was 'Paul'. Paul was a senior figure within the client organisation and had a reputation on the helpdesk for being 'two-faced,' confrontational and obstructive. To the CSRs on the desk, this meant that whilst on one level he would appear affable and personable to helpdesk staff, he would, in fact, report to the most senior people within NewsCo. that helpdesk staff were constantly unreliable and unable to do their job properly. Demonisation and client caricature were common to all of the various teams within the Call Centre. The dislike of Paul was further intensified as Tina the team leader of the helpdesk overtly suggested that Paul was plotting to have the contract terminated, as he felt that the client's staff could do a better job themselves. It was well known amongst the CSRs on the team that if CallCentreCo. lost the NewsCo. contract, individual futures within the Call Centre would be uncertain. The loss of a contract would almost certainly mean that those on weekly contracts would not be given further work. Even for those CSRs with longer contracts, the future was no more certain as a clause within the contract allowed for 'early release' if business conditions necessitated. For full-time

staff on the team the likelihood would be to transfer onto another team although this was again by no means certain. The prospect of losing the contract was therefore used as a motivational 'stick' to ensure consistently good performance amongst team CSRs. Service interactions with members of client staff, in particular Paul, always had a number of dimensions. Call Centre agents were unable to avoid the interminable inter-company managerial politics, power-broking, speculation, gossip and misinformation that were all part of the daily routine within the Call Centre. Despite the often idle nature of inter-company rivalry and intrigue, the prospect of losing the contract was no idle threat as guidance from Rajesh demonstrates:

> Matthew: ... (directed to Rajesh) *I've had this call* (pause) *but I don't really understand what the problem is, I don't think the caller knows either, can I just leave it?*
>
> Rajesh: ... *what do you mean leave it?*
>
> Matthew: ... *well I've put all the information on the database so it's recorded but I just don't know what to do with it now, can I just leave it to one side?*
>
> Rajesh: ... *no, we have to report to NewsCo. on all the open calls each month, they monitor everything ... if there are too many open calls it looks like we're not getting them sorted.*
>
> Matthew: ... *ok what should I do with this now?*
>
> Rajesh: ... *phone them back and get more details ... ask them what they want you to do with it ... and in future only open a call if you know how to go about getting it sorted.*
>
> (Discussion following request for advice, recorded in fieldwork journal)

Whilst individual CSRs had no option but to answer an incoming call, it was by no means certain that all incoming calls would result in the need to open a new 'active' call on the database. CSRs reported that NewsCo. staff would often attempt to log computer problems that could not be resolved. If such a problem was registered by the CSR on the database it would become an 'open' call, thus requiring resolution. Further, the call would show up in the NewsCo. desk's figures and consequently give the client a bad impression of the team. Rajesh in the dialogue above demonstrates

that the CSRs can, in certain circumstances, choose not to log calls that cannot be resolved. The ability of the CSR to do this would depend upon the degree to which they could persuade the caller that logging the call on the database was unnecessary.

The response of Rajesh demonstrates an awareness of how NewsCo. sought to monitor the performance of CSRs in general and the CallCentreCo. helpdesk in particular. It is also notable that, whilst departing from procedure, Rajesh suggests a strategy of not logging calls that cannot be resolved. Although this is not technically the correct procedure, as established within training, it allows the helpdesk time to respond to an initial call whilst not adding to the number of problems that are yet to be resolved. Despite the possibility of using fear of jeopardising the contract with NewsCo. as a motivation and performance enhancer, the significance of the power of the client in determining the future prospects of the desks was realised not only amongst CSRs as the following observed interaction between Venkat and Tina, the NewsCo. desk team leader, demonstrates:

> Venkat: ... (to Tina) *I've got a call for you*
>
> Tina: ... *no way, it's five past, I'm outta here...*
>
> Venkat: ... *It's Paul, he asked for you (pause) do you want me to tell him you've left?*
>
> Tina: ... *Shit, I'm sure he does this on purpose ... no I'll take it, let me log on ... put him through.*

(Observed team interaction,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

The importance of an appearance of 'good performance' to the client was internalised by all CSRs working within the team. The issue was used to motivate and discipline and was relevant to all levels of staff right across the team:

> Venkat: ... (to Matthew and Jenny) *I've asked Rajesh to try and close down some of the calls, I'm writing a report and Tina is in a meeting so you're gonna be answering calls on your own for an hour or so.*

Jenny: ... *Oh come on Venkat, you know what it was like yesterday. It's gonna be really busy.*

Venkat: ... *Yeah I know but we've got so many calls open, we really need to close them, you know how bad it looks if we've got too many active calls.*

Jenny: ... *ok but can we swap later I don't want to be the only one that's just taking calls, oh an' Matt too ...*

Venkat: ... *Maybe, we'll see after...* (interrupted by incoming call)

(Problem Manager issuing instructions,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

As well as becoming a proficient and competent CSR, recognising exactly how performance was judged and ensuring that the team '*looked good*' to the client was extremely important in becoming part of the team. Working late one evening with just one other colleague, as the rest of the team had left, Rajesh informed me that Paul from NewsCo. was on the line and that he wanted to talk to me direct; he had been unhappy with the way I had dealt with a number of queries earlier that day. Having not spoken to Paul before but being fully aware of his importance to the contract I felt apprehensive about the prospect of talking to him and concerned that I had let the team down, although I was unsure about why Paul would be unhappy with my day's work. Rajesh transferred the call to me. Talking to Paul for the first time, I was immediately aware that he was very agitated:

Paul: ... *Matthew, I know you're new to the team but a number of my staff have reported that you've been very rude and unhelpful to them. May I remind you that this contract is under constant review, I don't think very much of the service you've provided.*

Matthew: ... *Erm, ok, err... sorry, I don't really* (interrupted)

Paul: ... *Look this just isn't good enough I don't want excuses from you, I'm going to be taking this up with Tina*

Matthew: ... *Look I'm really sorry if I've upset someone, let me call them, I'll do it straight away.*

Paul: ... *it's a bit late for that now.* (Hangs up)

(Interaction with customer,
recorded later in fieldwork journal)

The interaction left me feeling very concerned, distressed and anxious. I felt that my continued employment within the Call Centre had been jeopardised; furthermore I felt extremely guilty in terms of the collective responsibility I had towards my own team. My sub-standard performance would have given Paul further ammunition with which to argue that the helpdesk function should be brought back under the auspices of the client's own organisation, thus risking the contract and therefore the employment of my colleagues. It was only when I heard laughter from Rajesh that I realised that the whole interaction had been an elaborate ruse organised by Rajesh with Rajesh adopting the role of Paul. Later on, this made sense to me, as I was unaware of any of the accusations that 'Paul' had laid against me being true. However, I was surprised, on recollection, to remember how apologetic I was, how concerned I was for my own employment and for the employment of my colleagues. The next day, the charade was recounted to the rest of the team and other members of the Call Centre staff. It was met with fits of laughter and was seen to be highly amusing. This was a ritual induction process, which had apparently, in different guises, been performed a number of times before. The customer simulation by Rajesh provides an example of how tacit skills that are developed through experience were passed onto new CSRs.

Whilst not representing a coherent, codified or comprehensive set of instructions on how to do the job, the tacit knowledge passed on via the team certainly made teams more effective in dealing with the clients. From early in their careers CSRs were encouraged to develop 'relationships' with the clients they worked with on a daily basis. This was justified by senior members of staff on the basis that working customer interactions would be more effective if they were based along the lines of a relationship, rather than a simple transaction of knowledge. Within the team the stimulus to build relationships with clients was manifest in naked competition between team members. I observed how Tina, the team leader, skilfully encouraged the male members of her team to construct artificial relationships with female clients by appealing to team members' sense of competitive machismo

Tina: ... r*ight, Venkat, Rajesh, Matt and Chris by the end of the day I want to know how many phone numbers you've got, and I want new ones as well, Venkat darling that means Sally from Swindon doesn't count.*

Rajesh: ... *What does the winner get?*

Tina: ... *list of women's phone numbers idiot, are you thick or just queer?*

(Observed team interaction,
recorded in fieldwork journal)

The motivation of staff to develop relationships with clients through the use of sexual competition by the team leader was not merely restricted to the male members of staff. Indeed Tina often singled out Jenny and Lizzy, the two female CSRs that were part of the team for particular attention:

Lizzy: ... (to Tina) *I've got this problem call, it's been logged by Patrick from Swindon, he's being really awkward because I want to close it for the figures but technically it's not really fixed...*

Tina: ... *what's the problem?*

Lizzy: ... *It's a server problem, a small error but it keeps re-occurring...*

Tina: ... *What have you done with it?*

Lizzy: ... *err well nothing really, Andy said that a fix was being worked on by Saxon but it might be a few weeks, he wants the call kept open until it's properly fixed.*

Tina ... *hold on...* (Shouts) *Jen!*

Jenny: ... *yeah?*

Tina: ... *How's your love life with Patrick? He's one of yours isn't he?*

Jenny: ... (laughing) *well yeah, he's pretty cool, we have a chat every now and then...*

Tina: ... *do us a favour darling, get him on the phone and tell him to stop being an ass and close this call of Lizzy's.*

(Observed team interaction,
following group to discussion of how to reduce 'open' calls,

recorded in fieldwork journal)

Through the many observed customer interactions and also from personally participating in interaction for up to 100 times a day for roughly a year, I became aware that the relationship-building between CSRs and clients was a key aspect of becoming a competent CSR. As the observations above illustrate, worker sexuality was often mobilised on behalf of the organisation in order to affect smoother interactions. The development of a web of artificial and superficial relations from within the team that extended into the domain of the client ensured that, rather than interactions being a one-way process with clients receiving a service, CSR interactions became much more reciprocal and involved mutual exchange of symbolic gifts and the trading of small favours and helped to establish a 'mock informality' (Beynon *et al.*, 2002). For example informal understandings of how the NewsCo. desk and client operated allowed CSRs to negotiate the process of closing open problems far more effectively. A CSR who had a so-called good relationship with a client would for instance request that the call be closed prior to resolution. This was reflected within the team's figures and consequently made the team look good. In return CSRs might offer information in the form of gossip to NewsCo. staff from other NewsCo. centres around the UK. The strategy of developing such relationships effectively oiled the Labour process of the Call Centre. Despite the enthusiasm for such relationships, borders were drawn and these were particularly evident where the development and maintenance of relationships conflicted with other work goals and priorities.

> Tina: (shouting at Rajesh) ... *Rajesh! You've been on that call for 24 minutes, what the hell are you talking about?*
>
> Rajesh: (selects 'mute' button) ... *I'm just having a chat to Emma at Peterborough...* (Interrupted)
>
> Tina: ... *that's enough, there are calls in the queue, tell her you'll ring back!*
>
> *(Observed interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal)*

Despite the importance of developing relationships, the observed interaction between Rajesh and his team leader shows how all other work activity, including the development of CSR/client relations is subverted to the primary goal of ensuring that calls are answered quickly, thus preserving the grade of service figure. However away from the point of production relationships established for mutual benefit were often maintained, on at least two occasions subsequent to the end of the ethnography I was aware of CSRs from the team arranging social activities with clients based in Manchester and Peterborough respectively.

Discussion of how to avoid surveillance or resist the authority of team leaders or the Call Centre management was not commonplace; most CSRs seemed to think that this was an inevitable feature of the Call Centre working environment. That is not to say however that they were compliant with being passive objects of supervisory surveillance. I observed on one occasion that Rajesh had been away from his desk for some time. This was unusual and the rest of the team were unaware of his whereabouts. Venkat (Problem Manager) was first to notice, he asked the team where he was, and not satisfied with the response he quizzed Tina about Rajesh's absence. From her computer, Tina, was able to check Rajesh's wrap-up status. Officially Rajesh was recorded as being on follow-up; this angered Tina as Rajesh was clearly not following-up any work at all. Rajesh returned later to face the wrath of Tina. In defence he argued that he had pressed the wrong wrap-up code and hit 'follow-up' rather than 'break' as he had actually gone for a cigarette break. Whilst it may have been the case that Rajesh had actually entered the incorrect code I was nonetheless alerted to the possibility of using wrap-up time in an inappropriate way. The statistics in terms of individual performance, whilst being available immediately, were often reviewed on a weekly basis. The aggregation of call times, break time etc. provided interested parties with data which could be used to identify trends in call times, outward calls, start and end times and of course break times. Officially, CSRs were permitted one hour for lunch and two five minute breaks throughout the day. In practice this was flexible with CSRs being give more time when requested and also having time restricted in busy periods. It was known amongst the team that Tina reviewed performance on a weekly basis, normally on a Friday morning. Fridays would often therefore be a mixed blessing for the team as whilst it represented the end

of the working week, it also meant that Tina would be '*looking at the stats*' (Comment made by Jenny in relation to Fridays, recorded in fieldwork journal). Tina's particular style of management was direct and often involved humiliation in front of the group:

> Tina: ... (in a voice that could be heard by all CSRs on the team) *Fucking hell Jen this week you've had 22 breaks, and it's only Friday morning, you pregnant or something?*
>
> Jenny (speechless and very embarrassed) *err, umm, no...*
>
> Tina: ... (backtracking) ... *good ... can you just try and keep the breaks to a minimum, you know I don't mind ... but you're only supposed to have two a day, and four is taking the piss...*
>
> (Group interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal)

As the incident with Rajesh had demonstrated however, it was possible for CSRs to apply an incorrect code to the phone unit so that their break time would be recorded as working activity. I suspected that this was a tactic that Rajesh had deployed on numerous occasions as I recorded his propensity to take a number of breaks throughout the course of the normal working day which I assumed to be cigarette breaks. With the aggregation of figures however the degree to which CSRs were using the correct codes was, from a supervisory perspective, difficult to tell.

Despite the restricted possibility of discussing worker resistance with team members and Call Centre staff in general within the workplace, social interactions between employees away from the point of production offered a rich source of less inhibited reflections upon working in the Call Centre. The bond between team members remained strong and this was reinforced away from the Call Centre with team members frequently socialising outside the Call Centre. Although the work within the Call Centre was clearly divided into teams, many off-site activities were ostensibly organised around the inclusion of the whole Call Centre. From early on (in the formal training process) I was encouraged to take part in the social activities that were organised through the Call Centre. The social 'night out' often dominated discussion when CSRs were not engaged on calls, the events of previous nights out

would be replayed, discussed, analysed and elaborated upon, whilst plans, strategies and ideas were plotted for the next:

> Lizzy: ... *so Matt are you up for coming out on Friday after work?*
> Matthew: ... *not sure, who's going?*
> Lizzy: ... *you may as well ask who isn't going, anyone who's anyone will be there.*
> Matthew: ... *do you often all go out together?*
> Lizzy: ... *well it's an open invitation really, but it'll be someone's birthday or someone will be leaving, or something like that, but most people just go to get pissed really.*

(One-to-one conversation in staff canteen,
recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

As Lizzy suggests, social events on the scale that were large enough to include most of the Call Centre happened roughly once a month and were often based around an event such as someone leaving the Call Centre. The rate of turnover meant that this presented frequent opportunities for a social get-together. Given the proximity of the Call Centre to Birmingham the favoured routine would be to go into the city centre straight from work. The evening would then be spent in various bars in and around Birmingham city centre. Despite Lizzy's insistence on the inclusivity of such social events, many of the Call Centre staff did not feel welcome. I spoke to Barry who, in his late 50s, had been within the organisation for a number of years and had been moved into the Call Centre against his wishes.

> Matthew: ... *so Barry, will you be out later this evening?*
> Barry: ... *what with you young things? I don't think so.*
> Matthew: ... *I'm only going for one, or two, why don't you come down to 'The Albion'* (the first stop pub) *if you just fancy a pint?*
> Barry: ... *no it's too rowdy when the'm all out, it's too much.*

(One-to-one discussion in car park prior to commencing work,
later recorded in fieldwork journal)

Further into the fieldwork I discovered that the social events planned were not, as suggested, inclusive for all staff, but rather were seen as the preserve of the younger Call Centre workers.

> Matthew: ... (directed to Val) *you looking forward to Andre's leaving do?*
> Val: ... (laughing) *erm I've not been invited*
> Matthew: ... *oh right, sorry I thought everyone had seen the email...*
> Val: ... *it's ok love, don't be embarrassed* (direct at me), *they don't invite people like us...*
> Matthew: ... *it's not I'm not ... erm ... what do you mean by that ... 'people like us'?*
> Val: ... *us oldies, they don't want us tagging along spoiling your fun*
> Matthew: ... *well you should come anyway, there are loads of people going, some from your desk too...*
> Val: ... *I don't think so but thanks anyway.*
>
> (One-to-one discussion at the water dispenser, later recorded in fieldwork journal)

Val's insight into the divisions of the Call Centre along age lines was, for me, to mark an increasing attention being paid to the fractures that exist between the CSRs within the Call Centre. I had previously assumed, or rather thought of the CSRs as being homogeneous, the topography of the Call Centre being structured along CSR, problem manager, team leader and Call Centre manager lines. The comments made by Val in relation to Call Centre nights out revealed a much more complex structuring involving symbolic demarcations based around age.

In a follow up interview I wanted to explore the role that the social activities of the Call Centre played in the lives of the CSRs:

> Matthew: ... *what are the best things about working in the Call Centre?*
> Lizzy: ...*The thing I like most is the atmosphere, ... yeah everyone is up for it!*
> Matthew: ... *up for it, what do you mean?*

Lizzy: ... (laughing, slightly embarrassed) *y'know like we all work, but we're only here to have a good time ... go out get pissed.*

Matthew: ... *right so you're talking about nights out.*

Lizzy: ... *yeah, well you know, you've been on them* ... (laughing) *you remember Christmas right ... that's was great, everyone was out...*

Matthew: ... *Yes, I really enjoyed it, it was a good time, but not everyone from the Call Centre went.*

Lizzy: ... *I know, some people are just pure misery arn't they?*

Matthew: ... *Well I suppose if you've got other commitments, it might be difficult*...(interrupted)

Lizzy: ... *that's rubbish ... if people can't be arsed to come out for a drink at Christmas, I can't be arsed with them.*

Matthew: ... *so who is it that goes on these nights out?*

Lizzy: ... *you know, you've been yourself!*

Matthew: ... *yes, but I mean you've been here longer than me, what sorts of people go on nights out?*

Lizzy: ... *to be honest I think it's a perk of being here.*

Matthew: ... *a perk?*

Lizzy: ... *yeah not all places have a good social life, this place definitely has, and they're really good (*referring to the Call Centre management team*) they give us money to organise proper events, like do you remember the bowling? They paid for that!*

Matthew: ... *why do you think the Call Centre managers are so keen to encourage everyone to socialise together?*

Lizzy: ... *well firstly, like I said you'll never get everyone, some people are just totally miserable, secondly the managers, not so much Amanda but the others are the biggest piss 'eads going and last – it must be good for morale, mustn't it?*

Matthew: ... *Yes, that's something I wanted to ask you, I noticed sometimes that the senior people from the Call Centre join in with the social aspects, like going out and so on. What do you think about that?*

Lizzy: ... *it's great, I mean they are all really nice people really, that's another good thing about working here that you can put down,* (referring to note taking during interview) *there's no 'them' and 'us' attitude, we've all just*

got a job to do and we do it and then everyone is happy. I personally think it's a good thing that they come out with us, with all staff really, you see each other in a different light, get to know them better, you feel like... I don't know it's just different working with people that you go out with too.

(Follow-up interview,
tape-recorded and later transcribed)

The opportunities for social interaction away from the Call Centre were certainly an important aspect of call centre work for a number of staff that I spoke to. Many CSRs, like Lizzy, regarded it as a very positive aspect of working in a call centre. A number also reported that this was also similar in previous call centres in which they had worked. During the 13-month initial field work, I attended five social nights, including a night that was organised to 'welcome' new staff, an evening spent bowling and then drinking, a Christmas party including a meal arranged away from the Call Centre and two further evenings spent drinking in pubs and nightclubs. Away from the point of production I was unable to access my fieldwork journal. As a substitute I always carried a small notebook but in practice wrote my observational notes the following day and transcribed these to the fieldwork journal as soon as was possible. It is also noteworthy that for a period of up to roughly a year after I had left the field, or the Call Centre, I still received, via email, invitations to attend Call Centre social evenings. A key aspect of any work-based social interaction away from the point of production is of course the propensity to discuss work-related issues. This was no different with Call Centre staff. The favoured topic of conversations on nights out would often be work, the nature of work or issues that had arisen recently and were deemed necessary for discussion. It was noticeable however that away from the point of production discussion seemed to be much calmer, democratic and collegial, I noticed on a number of occasions in a small group how work issues were related through common experience with all group members participating:

Jenny: ... *you know sometimes it really gets to me, but now I just think, hey this is my job, and at the end of the day that's all there is to it, I don't take things too serious anymore.*

Lizzy: ... *that's the way it's got to be...*

Mick: ... *thing is Jen, if you let people upset you, they've won, don't let them get to you, just hand them over to Rajesh, let them upset him.*

(Group laughter)

Rajesh: ... *yeah hand them over to me and I'll pass them onto Venkat!*

Tina: ... (to Jen) *look, seriously babe, you're great on the phones, you do a really good job, don't let some dickhead make you think that you're not!*

(Observed discussion at a bus stop prior to a social evening, recorded in notebook and later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

The presence of senior staff at many of the planned nights out also offered opportunities for informal discussions of staffing issues, career guidance and other matters which may not have been addressed within the confines of the Call Centre:

Lin (team leader InsuranceCo. desk): ... (to Amanda Call Centre manager): ... *hi... yeah I wanted to ask you something in work but, as we are here*...(interrupted)

Amanda: ... *sure what's on your mind?*

Lin: ... *I don't know if you remember but Nikki has asked if she can move onto my team from the ConsultingCo. Desk* (interrupted)

Amanda: ... *yeah and I said no, you know the policy ... no moves at the moment, we've got some new starters soon and I can't leave the ConsultingCo. desk understaffed.*

Amanda: ... *Yeah I know but I've been talking to Tony* (ConsultingCo. desk team leader) *and he's saying that Nikki is becoming a right pain the arse, I reckon it's because she wants to come and work on my team ... anyway what about if Rob went to the ConsultingCo. desk from my team?*

Andrea: ... *have you spoken to Rob about this*?

Lin: ... *Yeah yeah, he'd jump at the chance to do second-line* (more technical work, offering greater autonomy, not based upon answering incoming calls)...

Andrea: ... *OK, I don't see why not*...(interrupted)

Lin: ... *oh that's fantastic, I'll go and find Nikki, she'll be delighted!*

Andrea: ... *err I think you can buy me a drink first...*

(Observed interaction in a bar,
recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

I took the opportunity to discuss this with Lin later that evening:

Matthew: ... *I noticed that Amanda's let Nikki move onto your desk, that was pretty good how did you manage that?*

Lin: ... (laughing) *I noticed you were listening to us, why are you so interested?* [...] *The thing with Amanda is that she's ok when she thinks she's in control. A few drinks in her though and I knew I'd get it sorted.*

(One-to-one discussion,
recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

Away from the Call Centre I found that CSRs were also more effusive about their efforts to escape the daily routine of the Call Centre.

Rajesh: ... *It can be so boring at times, you can just see it in people's faces, it's like 'what the fuck am I doing here?'*

Matthew: ... (laugh) *what are you doing here?*

Rajesh: ... *Getting hammered, what about you?*

Matthew: ... *I didn't mean that I mean at work...*

Rajesh: ... *well a job's a job in'it?*

Matthew: ... *You could do something else, you've got options.*

Rajesh: ... *Yeah maybe, maybe I'll sort something out, in the meantime it's just me and the net.*

Matthew: ... *The Internet you mean?*

Rajesh: ... *Yeah it's a lifesaver isn't it?*

Matthew: ... *Is it?*

Rajesh: ... *Yeah, I just spend hours and hours surfing looking at shit.*

Matthew: ... *Don't they monitor Internet usage?*

Rajesh: ... *Who gives a shit, as long as you're taking calls, I don't think they care what you do.*

(One-to-one discussion in a bar,
later recorded in note book and transcribed to fieldwork journal)

The use of the Internet was certainly a 'hot' topic within the Call Centre. There had been a numbers of times when CSRs had been issued verbal warnings regarding the use of the Internet within work time. As Rajesh indicated however, it is difficult to distinguish these cases from a general lack of work effort. The minimal scale of use of the Internet by Rajesh together with his generally acceptable level of productivity probably protected him from disciplinary action. However the Internet did clearly offer CSRs a diversion out of the routine of the call centre. Within the NewsCo. team all CSRs had access to the Internet, often in the pursuit resolution of client problems CSRs would be required to access information from the Internet. However personal use, or misuse was widespread. The operating system used within the Call Centre allowed CSRs to have a number of windows open on their computer at any one time; this was normal and CSRs were trained to operate multiple windows and to quickly swap between them. This technique allowed me to maintain a fieldwork journal at the point of production and allowed other CSRs to access the Internet, and then to quickly change to another task to avoid suspicion. The ease at which CSRs could conceal their Internet usage made the recording of usage for ethnographic purposes difficult however I was able to discern a trend for CSRs to access primarily news and sports websites, such as the BBC, client websites, CallCentreCo's. own site and private email sites such as Hotmail. Perhaps most significantly I recorded widespread use of employment agency websites, presumably used as CSRs sought to secure alternative employment.

As the ethnography progressed it became clear that the picture emerging from the call centre was one of increasing complexity with respect to the identification of workplace resistance. Rajesh in particular offered concrete examples of resistant practices in terms of his escapism in the Internet and his misuse of wrap-up codes. These clear examples of resistance practice however contrast with the customer simulation that he initiated at my expense and his general willingness to conform to

the requirements established in terms of grade of service. The initial lack of clear examples of workplace resistance seemed to suggest that, in some limited sense, structural aspects of control vested within the technology of the Call Centre had certainly led to a reduction in the capacity of workers to engage in acts of workplace resistance. However further exploration revealed that, individually at least, workers offered resistance in the sense of 'deviating' away from a perceived management ideal. In the case of Rajesh for example, resistance took the form of using the Internet to alleviate the boredom that his repetitive job offered him. Furthermore working with Rajesh also revealed how he was able to defeat managerial supervision through the deliberate misuse of wrap-up codes. The form of resistance is technologically sophisticated because it is able to subvert the surveillance machinery by turning its apparatus against itself.

The Nature of Control

My interest in workplace resistance within the Call Centre led me to explore the nature of control. Control in the Call Centre, as in any workplace, was vested in the social relations of production, or the organisational hierarchy. CSRs reported to a team leader, who was assisted by a problem manager. In the first instance it was the team leader who exerted controlling influences over the team. Within the Call Centre team leaders adopted what might be conceptualised as a variety of leadership models, and it was notable how team leaders were able to adapt their management style to suit particular conditions. The senior manager within the Call Centre appeared to encourage a motivational style and allowed team leaders considerable discretion in terms of how to motivate the employees. Such techniques ranged from 'employee of the week', to ridicule of poor performers, to prizes for the most effective in terms of taking calls. Such accolades were highly sought after and a general theme of competition between individuals and between teams permeated the Call Centre environment. On several occasions I noted how Tina, the team leader, effectively galvanised productive effort with prompts to be more effective than other teams. To this end the high visibility of moving message signs provided an instant guide to how a particular team was performing compared to another. The message sign was variously celebrated and derided depending on how it reflected upon the team. There can be no doubt that this atmosphere of competition regularly boosted productivity of

CSRs, and in discussion it became clear how important the competition was to both individual and team:

> Venkat: ... *it's been a good week you know, let's celebrate with a pint at lunch down 'The Albion'.*
> Matthew: ... *it's not been that good ... we've still got loads of stuff unresolved and it will show in the report on Monday.*
> Jenny: ... *you're such a pessimist, our figures have been the best in the Centre, check out the grade of service* (gestures to the moving message board).
> Rajesh: ... *yeah music to Tina's ears I bet.*
> Tina: ... *what's that Rajesh*?
> Rajesh: ... *grade of service, Tina, been at 100 for most of the week.*
> Tina: ... *yeah well done guys, lets keep it like that.*
> Venkat: ... *come on then, who's up for a pint, we deserve it.*
>
> (Observed team interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal)

> Matthew: ... *Do you miss your old team?*
> Lizzy: ... *don't be silly, look they're only over there* (waves and shouts *'yoo-hoo'* across the Call Centre, some CSRs laugh and waved in response) ... *to be honest it's great here, our grade of service is always higher than they get, that makes me look good. Sometimes I send them emails and stuff when theirs is like at 40 or something like that, y'know just saying look at me, I'm great and you're bollocks.*
> Matthew: ... *Yes but they're really understaffed, it's not really fair to compare...*
> Lizzy: ... *well grade of service is what matters, and I don't care as long as I'm better than them.*

Whilst the moving message board presented an immediate guide to performance on the shop floor, problem managers, team leaders and the Call Centre management had access to much more detailed measures of individual performance. The integration of

the telephone system, ACD software, computer database and surveillance equipment meant that supervisory agents could monitor every aspect of the Labour process of CSRs whilst at the Call Centre. The supervised Labour process dovetailed into a much broader system of surveillance. As an exercise to explore the extent of surveillance within the Call Centre, I compiled a surveillance diary over the course of a standard day which is outlined in Appendix V.

The many complex and integrated systems of surveillance were not hidden from those over whom they gazed. The formal training had, for example, made much of the systems of surveillance, which watched over the Call Centre, but painted these to be not a threat to CSRs but in their own interest. They permitted observation and monitoring at a *'distance'*, thus being less *'intrusive'* and *'threatening'* (quotes taken from initial training, recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal) than having someone watch over you directly. CSRs were forewarned that their supervisors would be monitoring their calls remotely and that monitoring in this way was part of the Call Centre routine. CSRs, in discussion, offered a number of responses to the perpetual capacity of supervisors to monitor every aspect of their working life:

> Lizzy: ... *yes everyone knows about how they listen in, it doesn't bother me to be honest, I've got nothing to hide so if Tina is listening she'll see exactly how good I am.*
>
> (One-to-one discussion, recorded in fieldwork journal)

> Jenny: ... *personally I don't think it's a good thing, but I don't think Tina does it that much. Mark was telling us that, you know Barry, he constantly listens in, I think that's wrong, altogether, what do you think?*
> Matthew: ... *well in training they said it was to make sure that we're doing things properly, it's part of the training*...(interrupted)
> Jenny: ... *yeah well they would say that wouldn't they!*
>
> (One-to-one discussion in staff canteen, recorded in notebook and later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

Rajesh: ... *I don't care really to be honest Matt, it doesn't bother me, I always know anyway*...(Interrupted)

Matthew: ... *what? You always know when they are listening in? – How?*

Rajesh: ... *yeah I do, I've been here so long I can tell!!*

Mathew: ... *go on – tell me, tell me how!*

Rajesh: ... *ok, but it's difficult* (pause) *next time you're on the phone listen very carefully, if someone starts listening you'll hear like 'click' that's it that means they're on!*

Matthew: ... *is it loud?*

Rajesh: ... (whispering) *no it's really quiet – you have to listen very carefully.*

(One-to-one discussion during initial training, recorded in notebook, later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

As the dialogues above highlight, the surveillance capacity of the Call Centre Managers and team leaders was well known and often taken for granted. Jenny in discussion highlights how, despite often-contradictory statements from the Call Centre hierarchy, surveillance was often understood as a direct control measure. Despite the presence of extensive overt systems of surveillance, CSRs seldom showed any concern to attempt to subvert its gaze. Indeed, as mentioned previously, employee monitoring was cast as being non-threatening. For example employees who were deemed as under-performing were identified by the extensive monitoring system. Responses to such employee performance were mixed but generally team leaders and senior CSRs were keen to at least attempt to coach individual CSRs in order to produce better performance. This would take the form of a senior CSR or team leader expressing concern for example at the length of wrap-up time. Particular attention would then be paid to how such time could be minimised. Throughout the period of the ethnography I was unaware of any CSR who was asked to leave the Call Centre due to poor performance. Yet in contrast one-to-one performance improving coaching of even quite senior CSRs was relatively commonplace.

08

Conclusion: Reconceptualilsing Resistance

Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis aims to draw the preceding discussion together by arguing for a reconfigured notion of workplace resistance, which acknowledges the ambiguous nature of many of the resistant practices identified by the preceding ethnographic investigation. Furthermore a broader ontological account of the nature of work which seeks to understand the labour process as producing differential subjectivities, thus usefully explaining the inability of managerial control to ever be rendered 'perfect' and thus exorcising all resistant elements from work organisations.

Reconceptualising Resistance

In investigating workplace resistance in a Call Centre characterised by total managerial surveillance, the thesis proceeded to reformulate the question in terms of the social relations at the point of production in light of deep factors operating at the level of the overall mode of production. The thesis argues that the Labour process remains a conceptually useful way of analysing contemporary employment practices. The valorisation imperative compels the agents of Capital to constantly revolutionise the technical organisation of production in pursuit of ever-higher levels of surplus value. The subordination of Labour, both formal and real, generally results in a tendency toward estrangement and alienation at the point of production on behalf of workers. The conceptualisation of resistance as a specific aspect of organisational misbehaviour allows us to explain the imperative that Capital has to overcome such resistant practices. The surface appearances of such acts of resistance are, however, only *empirical manifestations* of the potential for Labour to be non-productive. Thus control and resistance do not exist in a symbiotic state; rather they are dialectically related. Control conditions and reproduces resistant behaviours but is also conditioned and reproduced by resistance in the form of the capacity that Labour has to be non-productive. The elimination of empirical resistance for the organisation will therefore, by definition, result in the most efficient organisation of production. From the perspective of Capital, resistance contributes to the indeterminacy of Labour; the realisation that that the employment of Labour offers heterogeneous returns demands that Capital implements control techniques in order to attempt to manipulate the level

of output produced by Labour. Resistance, even its mere potential, is therefore targeted by Capital. Such strategies are however targeted at *specific* acts of resistance. Within the context of the Call Centre, for example, the extensive system of surveillance and control, the mix of centralised supervision, the deployment of team working and the mobilisation of social interaction to affect smooth employment relations and customer interaction demonstrate the deployment of a sophisticated and complex control strategy to subvert and suppress acts of resistance and semi-resistance. This thesis argues that such control strategies have not been wholly successful, nor can they be, in gaining complete total control over the Labour process. Empirically there still remains areas of non-productive Labour within the employment relation, termed semi-resistance within this thesis. More significantly however control cannot ever overcome resistance because resistance, or the possibility of non-productive, indeterminate Labour, is in fact a precursor for implementation of control. Furthermore, the imposition of control itself, based upon the real subordination of Labour, in an effort to overcome non-productive behaviour, alienates Labour and further inhibits the possibilities of productive activity.

It is necessary in recovering the explanatory power of the analytical category of resistance to move beyond empirical identifications of resistance. The ethnographic account produced in pursuit of this thesis can be considered as providing ample empirical data for an exploratory consideration of workplace resistance in new organisational forms in general and the Call Centre specifically. As already established, initially the researcher found that opportunities for resistance had indeed been highly restricted under a regime characterised by technological surveillance. Furthermore, the working environment was characterised as being non-conflictual, with work being decentralised and hierarchies being devolved into a team-based organisation. The task therefore for a critical realist reconceptualisation of resistance is to account for, and explain, the empirical lack of traditional forms of workplace resistance such as Trade Union mobilisation, whilst explaining the origin and function of other non-productive forms of workplace behaviour, or what is considered to be *'new forms of workplace semi-resistance'*.

The understanding of resistance in relation to non-productive Labour renders resistance not a special case, confluence of events, specific arrangement or conscious

strategy on behalf of Labour, but rather, a capacity inherent *within all Labouring* activity. Labour has the potential to be productive; whilst at the same time it has the potential to be non-productive. *What is novel about this approach is the realisation* that it is not in the individual psychology of workers that *this resistance is determined*, nor in the structural arrangements of the employment relation, or the power of employees to establish what is and what is not permissible within the workplace but rather it is a function of all Labouring activity under Capitalism. Transcending the wage relationship and subsequent subordination of Labour all wage relationships are necessarily based upon the capacity for Labour to be productive, thus, paradoxically, all wage relationships are founded upon the ability of Labour to be non-productive and hence resistant. The task therefore of studies within this area, and hence this thesis, is to understand and explain the process of the *production* of resistant practices.

Structural and Cultural Control and the Production of Resistant Practices

Having outlined the epistemological and ontological nature of resistance in the workplace, we are now able to revisit elements of the ethnographic account of workplace relations at the point of production to explore and to attempt to explain the semi-resistant practices that were in evidence.

The growing sophistication of the call centre literature has been successful in delineating call centres between quality and quantity poles. This has resulted in what is commonly accepted as an understanding of call centres as either driven by quantity *or* quality imperatives. (Taylor *et al* 2002.) The fieldwork demonstrated that the main measure of CSR performance was the grade of service figure. The importance of the grade of service figure was constantly reinforced both by the team leader and other members of the team. The public display of the performance of team and individual was carefully orchestrated to encourage peer pressure amongst CSRs to maintain productive effort. The visible grade of service figure offered a seemingly impartial review of performance. The capacity for CSRs to be non-productive was therefore reduced firstly through the technological monitoring of performance, the public display of this performance and then culturally through lateral control exerted by other team members. Only on occasions when the grade of service figure had fallen

significantly was hierarchical control by the team leader reasserted. In terms of the production of resistant practices therefore the capacity of CSRs to engage in non-productive activity was frustrated by the capacity for technological control. We can understand the lack of resistance in this instance through both the controlling elements of the call centre and also the cultural impact of team working and the opportunity for self-control that this brings.

Whilst individual CSRs were able to make themselves unavailable to take incoming calls, pressures from call centre management in the form of memos, team leaders in the form of '*bollockin's*' and other CSRs produced an atmosphere where the use of wrap-up time was, to a large extent, discouraged. Direct control over the Labour process often took the form of the 'bollockin'' and consisted of a collective reprimand from the team leader, as recorded previously:

> Tina [shouting] ... *oi, you lazy bastards,* [addressed to the rest of team] *look at the grade of service figure! Get your fingers out ... Jenny, stop chatting up Chris and answer some calls, Matt get off wrap-up you've been on there for 8 minutes...*
>
> Jenny: [indignantly] ... *I'm not chatting anyone up, I'm closing down a call...*
>
> Tina ... *Jenny,* [exasperated] *I need you to answer calls, look at the queue! ... it's my head on the block up there* [points to Call Centre managers desks] ...
>
> (Team interaction observed during busy period, recorded in fieldwork journal, ppg 147)

Whilst much of the observational data, interviews and notes are suggestive of a relatively flat hierarchy in terms of a working environment, the presence and frequency of team leader 'bollockin's' seems to suggest that hierarchical control over the Labour process was still very much in evidence. The data recorded above demonstrates awareness on behalf of the team leader that the non-productive (and hence resistant) behaviour of the team is problematic and as the team leader, Tina is

compelled to act. Tina firstly appeals to the team's sense of purpose, suggesting that the team are being lazy; this implores the deployment of greater productive activity. Secondly, Tina uses the phrase '*get your fingers out'*, although a common phrase, this has a quite literal meaning in the context of the Call Centre. It suggests that the CSRs should engage in more productive activity, clearly using their fingers to manipulate the telephone or keyboard. Thirdly, Tina identifies with skill and precision the exact non-productive activity in which her languid charges are engaged. In this sense the grade of service provides a proxy measure of productive activity. When the grade of service figure starts to decline, the team leader reasserts control relations over the team in an effort to correct the decline. Significantly, the grade of service figure helped to maintain productive activity, not merely when the figure was declining, but more generally through a carefully fostered culture of competition, again as documented previously:

> Tina: ... [shouting across the Call Centre] *haha, look at InsuranceDesk* [rival team] ... *45 percent grade of service ... just like the team leader ... bag of shit.*
>
> (Observed inter-team interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal, ppg 148)

Light-hearted competition between teams on the basis of grade of service figure was a distinct feature of the Call Centre environment and such competition was certainly aided by the highly visible and public display of the teams' grade of service figures. As the observation above demonstrates, the competitive ethic was often mobilised by team leaders to encourage productive efforts, and whilst there was little evidence to suggest that this was considered important to individual CSRs, it promoted a team identity and created a sense of the 'other' with respect to CSRs who were not from the same team. As observed on a social gathering (bowling) away from the Call Centre:

> James: ... [directed to the NewsCo. Team] *there are too many on your side, do you want to come and bowl in our lane?* [directed to Jenny]
>
> Jenny: ... *What and be with you losers? I don't think so!*

Tina: ... *Ha-ha well said Jen, we don't want you going over there an' picking up their bad habits, next thing our grade of service will be shit like theirs.*

(Observed group interaction, away from point of production,
recorded in notebook,
later transcribed to fieldwork journal)

The competitive ethic experienced within the Call Centre was carefully nurtured and reinforced by senior Call Centre staff. This complemented the more direct approach of CSR management characterised as the 'bollockin'' and acted as a subtle hegemonic force aimed at maintaining productive effort. Moreover, differentiation between teams on the basis of perception of grade of service provided individual CSRs with a motivation to aspire to work in what was conceived as the 'better' teams. As Liz, a CSR who joined the NewsCo. team from another team illuminated:

Matthew: ... *what was it like on your previous desk?*

Liz: ... *it was manic, so, so busy, an' I tell you, it's not like this.*

Matthew: ... *what do you mean?*

Liz: ... *well for a start off Tina's sorted, y'know she don't care, you can do what yer want as long as the grade of service is ok. I like that, that's what's important.*

Matthew: ... *so the other desk was, like, more strict?*

Liz: ... *yeah I guess, in a way, but it was so busy, the phone was always ringing, like constantly, there were always calls in the queue so that's why the grade of service was so low...*

Matthew: ... *sounds like they need more staff...*

Liz: ... *yeah maybe, but I'm not bothered really, ... I'm really glad they put me here* [referring to her current team] *the grade of service is always really high and it make things, y'know, less hassle.*

(One-to-one discussion,
recorded in fieldwork journal ppg. 149)

There was little evidence of any form of organised or collective resistance to the promotion of competition between teams within the Call Centre. However collective behaviour, despite the intensely individualised nature of the Labour process was apparent. The example of the social interaction away from the point of production, as outlined in the ethnography, was deeply rooted in the fabric of daily life at the call centre. I also noted that, despite newspapers being banned from the Call Centre, most mornings a variety of newspapers were left within the men's toilets cubicles. This resulted in a number of male CSRs taking breaks in order to read the newspaper.

Most CSRs with whom the issue was discussed suggested that whilst competition was not a significant aspect of their working life, they were aware of the need to ensure that their team was not let down. The collective responsibility felt within the team that I worked with was tangible; not only was it important that the grade of service figure was maintained above the specified level, the sense of contributing to a 'team effort' was reported in most discussions about this issue as being an important aspect of workplace life. Perhaps more significantly, CSR were quick to identify that a falling grade of service level was associated with poor overall performance and that this would very quickly come to the attention of the client. The importance of this lay in the widely understood fact that contracts between the Call Centre and client were often under constant review and weekly reports on team performance could make the difference between contracts being renewed or cancelled, thus directly threatening the continued employment of CSRs.

Whilst direct measures of performance, such as grade of service, were used to motivate CSRs, individual Call Centre workers were also aware of the importance of providing a 'quality service'. Expressed in the discourse of Customer Service, the importance of an appearance of 'good performance' to the client was internalised by all CSRs working within the team. The issue was used to motivate and discipline and was relevant to all levels of staff right across the team:

> Venkat: ... (to Matthew and Jenny) *I've asked Rajesh to try and close down some of the calls, I'm writing a report and Tina is in a meeting so you're gonna be answering calls on your own for an hour or so.*

Jenny: ... *oh come on Venkat, you know what it was like yesterday. It's gonna be really busy,*

Venkat: ... *yeah I know but we've got so many calls open, we really need to close them, you know how bad it looks if we've got too many active calls.*

Jenny: ... *ok but can we swap later I don't want to be the only one that's just taking calls, oh an' Matt too ...*

Venkat: ... *maybe, we'll see after*... (interrupted by incoming call).

(Problem Manager issuing instructions,
recorded in fieldwork journal, pg. 152)

As well as becoming a proficient and competent CSR, recognising exactly how performance was judged and ensuring that the team '*looked good*' to the client was extremely important in becoming part of the team. Beyond mastery of the technical skills associated with working in the Call Centre, such as the simultaneous manipulation of various computer and telephony systems at the same time as performing customer interactions, becoming an established part of the team also involved the acquisition of a degree of tacit knowledge. This knowledge was acquired through both the completion of routine tasks and instruction from other team members. Learning by doing was a key aspect of Call Centre life and within the boundary of the team, all team members took as their responsibility the training of new staff beyond the formal training programme. During the research within the Call Centre it became clear that the motivation behind the passing on of this tacit knowledge was very clearly linked into the organisation's overall strategy, and in particular much of the informal learning that took place within teams was directed toward ensuring that new staff appeared to be proficient, professional and purposive to the client. The outward perception of the team toward the client, as previously discussed, was considered to be immensely important, and a crucial aspect of the training and induction process was the way in which new recruits came to accept the importance of the outward perception of their interactions and, significantly, the factors which contributed toward making a '*good impression.*' Whilst the technical training carried out away from the team had stressed the importance of '*speaking clearly and confidently*' and the use of a '*variety of tonal expressions*', (Collected from structured training programme, later transcribed to fieldwork journal) the advice

and instruction from colleagues at the point of production was both more practical and more specific.

> Tina: ... *Matthew, now remember next call you pick up, really try and put some energy into it, you know like you want to be here...*
> Matthew: ... (call is answered, customer interaction takes place, call is ended)
> Tina: ... *see it's easy innit? You'll enjoy it more too!*
> Matthew: ...*I've heard some people say you should 'smile down the phone', what do you think about that, is that good?*
> Tina: ... (forced laughter) *well if you want to try it I'm sure it will be fine, but really we just want them* (reference to the client) *to think good things about us.*
> Matthew: ... *right I know what you mean, I guess how we sound, it's important if that's the only impression you can get of someone.*
> Tina: ... *exactly Matt, that's it, that's it, that's what I like to hear!*

(Instruction from team leader during training, recorded later in fieldwork journal)

> Venkat: ...*Jenny sit up straight will you, you look like a right slob.*
> Jenny: ... (protesting) *does it really matter how I sit, like I mean really?*
> Venkat: ... *yeah it affects the way you sound!*
> Rajesh: ... *bullshit Venkat!*
> Venkat: ... *nah, it does man, really, it's like good posture, you present yourself well, I'm telling you... customers hear it, they know!*

(Observed group interaction, recorded in fieldwork journal)

The selected observational data presented above demonstrate that tension was certainly evident at the point of production in the Call Centre. CSRs where often pulled in both quality and quantity directions. Given the contradiction between quality and quantity that lay at the heart of the operationalisation of the CSR's role, it is hard to understand how CSRs were able successfully to fulfil the requirements of such irreconcilable task demands. In making sense of production culture of the Call Centre,

the mobilisation of twin managerial (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998) discourses of 'competition' between teams and 'looking good' in the eyes of the client, becomes an important aspect of understanding the Call Centre Labour process. The mobilisation of these discourses as part of a managerial strategy effectively nullified inherent tension by requiring CSRs to fulfil *both* quality and quantity requirements. Furthermore, the importance of looking good to the ever-present client meant that all interactions were deemed necessarily to require quality interactions. The alignment of individual CSR, team and Call Centre objectives in servicing the customer allowed for both the simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus value (Burawoy 1979). The shared responsibility meant that the message of quantity *and* service quality was effectively internalised by all CSRs with the conceptions of 'looking good' in the eyes of the client and 'competition' between teams becoming essentially hegemonic. Despite the importance of 'looking good' all CSRs were aware that incoming calls had to be answered within the first two rings. Failure to do so would result in a deterioration of the grade of service figure; at times this could therefore require the curtailment of existing customer interactions in order to ensure that individual CSRs were free and available to take the next incoming call. The importance of the grade of service was reinforced because it was a key way in which the client judged the performance of the team and secondly provided a source of inter-team competition.

Thus far it has been suggested that managerial control strategies, such as the mobilisation of contradictory discourses have been successful in promoting effective production within the Call Centre. However whilst the empirical data is readily able to identify explicit managerial strategies, the identification of resistance to such strategies is somewhat harder to locate. It could therefore be concluded that empirically at least, the Call Centre and its attendant social relations have effectively reduced resistance to a minimum. However it bears fruit to look more closely at the managerial strategies for producing conformity. Having identified the dialectical impulse that exists in the employment relationship between the mobilisation of productive and non-productive activity, there are essentially two causal powers which exert influence; these have been identified as elements of structural and cultural control. Structurally, the surveillance, monitoring and public display of performance figures promotes productive effort both hierarchically and laterally. Culturally, the deployment of teamwork encourages a desire for workers to belong and thus

contribute to specific teams. The establishment of the customer as a threat to continued employment helps to ensure that the aims of individual CSRs converge with those of the call centre managers. Despite both the structural and cultural factors arrayed against the possibility of resistance, close observation of the Labour process was able to detect a distinct divergence from the managerial ideal by CSRs, which in turn did lead to non-productive activity, which I have termed semi-resistance and which can be understood as the production of differential subjectivities.

The Production of Differential Subjectivities

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) identify the *'appropriation of identity'* as a key dimension in which the conflict between Capital and Labour is played out. It is suggested by the authors that the formation of a distinct identity on the part of Labour is a prerequisite for all forms of workplace resistance. In many respects the formation of identity to which they refer is founded upon the alienation of Labour power from its product as understood in the Orthodox Marxist account. Within the context of the Call Centre, however, the concept of the 'appropriation of identity' has an altogether more concrete resonance. As the reported empirical observations identify, much of the controlling strategies pursued by the Call Centre management team, such as the deployment of CSRs' sexuality at the point of production, are directly targeted at the identity of the worker. In the wider literature on the growth and development of the service sector the conception of the colonisation of worker identity is often referred to as 'High Commitment' employment. In the case of call centres, the role of call centre employees as *the* product (Macdonald and Sirianni, 2001:5) has significant effects. Amongst these, the tacit acknowledgement that success depends upon the degree to which call centre staff are able to subscribe to and achieve the goals of the organisation.

In this sense the Call Centre workers were required to invest their own identity in the project of production. The promotion of a corporate identity for example requires the CSR to become the embodiment of corporate ideals, the articulation of management ambition. Moreover the supplantation of the corporate logo where personality once resided, the requisite of much service sector employment, is no longer sufficient for the Call Centre. Management, in this instance, require the nurturing and development

of key relationships with clients, relationships that are elevated to a monumental importance. For the organisation, such relationships mean the continuation of business, for the individual the relationships mean the continuation of employment. The affectation of such managed relations variously require the subversion, extension or suppression of individual personal characteristics. Although compliance to the managerial ideal was monitored through a complex web of integrated technological systems, enforcement was directed in the first instance by the Call Centre management team and their agents the team leaders. Overt managerial attempts to control outward appearances became attempts to control certain aspect of a CSR's own individual identity. Moreover, the operationalisation of 'identity management' extended beyond the mere management of verbal interactions. Despite all customer interaction being conducted over the telephone, the Call Centre operated a strict dress code that included the specification that men should wear shirts, ties and trousers and that women should wear '*suitable business attire'* (documentary quote taken from memo circulated within the Call Centre). This caused a great deal of resentment on behalf of CSRs. Notwithstanding the clear stratagem of the deployment of CSRs' sexuality in the service of organisational goals, other aspects of CSRs' identity was variously adapted, accentuated, and even subverted. Furthermore, the Call Centre restricted the personalisation of workspaces - for CSRs, the keeping of personal items in desk drawers, and on desk spaces was forbidden. These policies, which effectively sought to either engineer or subvert CSR identities, were rigorously enforced. For example, those who were unwilling or unable to wear suitable clothing were often singled out and ritually humiliated.

> Jane: ... *Mike, have you got those jeans on again, you must live in them* [loud laughter from many CSRs].
>
> Mandy ... [addressing a group of Male CSRs'] *c'mon lads I know it's hot but that's no excuse to let our standards drop is it? Can we make sure tomorrow that we remember to put our ties on please?*
>
> Gary: ... *ha-ha you look like the 'Man from Del Monte' in those trousers!*
>
> (All quotes taken from observed group interactions)

Despite the clear guidelines on the dress code within the Call Centre, CSRs would often question the need for formal attire when being in contact with the customer over the phone. There was however, a standard response from the Call Centre management, which always met such a challenge:

Nick: ... *Why can't we wear shorts? I mean it doesn't really matter, they* (the client) *can't see what we are wearing.*

Lynn: ... *You know why, clients are often shown around the Call Centre as part of the contact discussion and stuff, your legs won't really be a selling point will they?* (laughter)

(Observed discussion over lunch, later recorded in fieldwork journal)

Significantly the desire for CSRs to adopt a corporate uniform often went further than merely specifying which particular combinations of clothes were acceptable in the workplace, as a discussion with one of the HR managers demonstrates:

Kathy: ... *Yeah we do care about people and we like to see them do well here, I think it's our job to support staff where we can, sometimes this can be straightforward or sometimes more 'unconventional.'*

Matthew: ... *'unconventional,' what do you mean by that?*

Kathy: ... *oh, I mean like just doing whatever we need to make sure people get on, you know...*

Matthew: ... *err, not really, no, can you give me an example?*

Kathy: ... *well ok ... for example* (lowers voice and leans closer to me) *there is this guy, who just got a promotion in the Centre to an important job on the management side* (Laughing) *no names, though!* (It is however clearly evident who this person is). *Anyway, don't take this the wrong way, but he really stank, I mean really bad, we can't have that, he would be setting a bad example. Anyway I didn't want to embarrass him or anything so I took him into town and we brought him a new suit, and I gave home some money and told him to get his self down to Tony and Guy. Scruffy get!*

(Discussion with HR manager, notes taken,
transcribed in fieldwork journal)

The outward appearance of CSRs then became in many respects the domain of the Call Centre management, specifying what was and what was not acceptable, and where they felt it necessary, the management team took direct action. The importance of appearance also extended to the working environment in which CSRs worked. As noted above, strict rules governed the organisation of the CSRs' workspace. For example, newspapers were not allowed on desks; the CSRs were instructed that these should be either left in the lockers provided or kept under the desk. As previously mentioned, CSRs were forbidden from personalising their workspace, but team leaders were permitted some personal effects and senior managers would often decorate their desks with many pictures of family and other personal mementos. This rule for CSRs was strictly enforced and I observed on two occasions when CSRs were asked to remove personal items from their workspaces. The displacement of distinctiveness from the workplace was duplicated within the virtual working environment, corporate screensavers were installed on all computers and nothing but standard software and hardware could be used.

An incident that was noted in the ethnographic journal provides a specific illustration of the importance to the Call Centre management of depersonalising the working environment of CSRs. During the 1999 pre-Christmas season, I noted that a number of individuals within the Call Centre had begun to decorate their workspaces with novelty items in keeping with tradition. These included strips of tinsel, which were taped to the desk partitions, and a number of small novelty Christmas trees had also begun to appear at various workstations. It was confirmed to me that it was common practice to exchange Christmas cards containing seasonal greetings, and that these were usually displayed pinned to the desk partitions. This situation appeared to cause some unease with Call Centre management and an e-mail was circulated to all staff, saying that decorations must be removed immediately and that offending items, if not removed, would be forcibly removed and disposed of, as these were clearly in breach of Call Centre regulations on the decoration of the workspace. In response to the e-mail, a number of CSRs in the Call Centre expressed their dissatisfaction. It seemed contradictory for the company to celebrate the spirit of Christmas in a very public

way through the request of donation to charity for its Christmas dinner, but yet deny individuals the chance to celebrate in their own way. *In an effort to assuage the* dissent felt by Call Centre staff, a team leader suggested to the Call Centre management that a collection be organised and that one large Christmas tree be bought and decorated, so that everyone in the Call Centre could see the Christmas tree, and therefore individuals would not need to decorate their desks. This solution was accepted by Call Centre management and the team leaders asked every CSR for a donation for the tree and collected the money. I witnessed one of my colleagues refusing to donate to the collection and this colleague subsequently became the butt of jokes within the Call Centre, which focused upon his unwillingness to give money for this so-called good cause. The jokes predictably set my colleague up as being a 'scrooge' and were also linked to his Scottish nationality. I was surprised by the longevity of this humour and also by its severity. The reason for the initial joke was quickly forgotten, yet the individual retained a reputation for being frugal and unwilling to participate in team events.

The clear attempts that were made by managers of the Call Centre to control or regulate the outward appearance or manifestation of individual CSRs' identity within the call centre is significant in that they suggest a desire to control and regulate the actual identity of CSRs. The motivation behind such actions are clearly led by profit; the deployment of worker identity in the pursuit of valorisation (Hochschild, 1983) clearly becomes a key way in which individual organisations compete with one another. Clearly if organisations are increasingly competing on the basis of the quality of the emotional engagement of the customer service interaction then it is without doubt in the interest of the organisation to attempt some form of 'quality control' over this interaction. Within the Call Centre the ethnography and subsequent analysis suggests that this was systematically attempted through both structural and cultural control.

The absence of any real elements of control over the identity domain reveals a divergence of ambition between managers and workers with respect to the use of identity. However the attempted strategies of control opened up further opportunities for workers engage in the production of semi-resistance practices through reassertion of self-identity and identity politics. Lizzy provided a revealing example:

Lizzy: … *'ohh, you're not going to tape the interview are you?*

Matthew: … *yeah why?*

Lizzy: … *err, I sound like a white woman on tape.*

(Recorded in one-to-one Interview
later transcribed)

The significance of the above comment from Lizzy was not immediately clear to me in the interview and I therefore had to arrange a secondary interview to discuss the significance of this statement further:

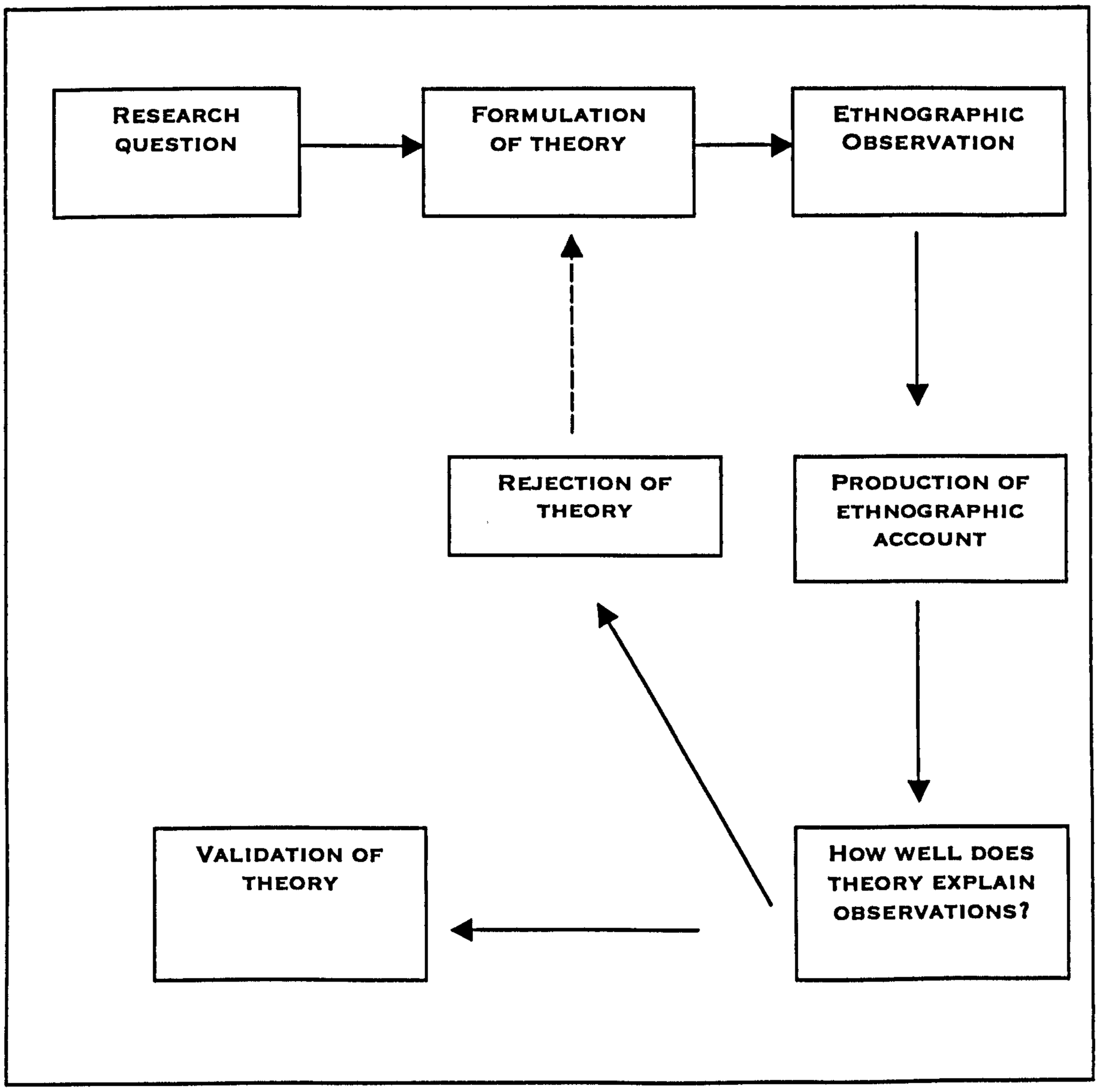
> Matthew: … *you may remember that last time we spoke that you said that you sounded like a 'white woman on tape,' I just wanted to ask you about that.*
>
> Lizzy: … (laughing) *what, you've come all this way to ask me about that?*
>
> Matthew: … *well and other things, I was really interested in what you said, but I was thinking about on the phones, y'know when you're taking calls, do you think that you sound white when you're on the phone?*
>
> Lizzy: … *well yes and no, I mean it's sometimes difficult to tell, but there are ways.*
>
> Matthew: … *ways, what sort of ways, can you tell me more?*
>
> Lizzy: … *well you remember Matt when we were talking about that new guy from Swindon, and Tina went down there and came back and said 'you wouldn't believe it, he's as black as the ace of spades!' Well I knew...I could just tell...but you're white so why would you?*
>
> Matthew: … *So is it important that people know that you're not white?*
>
> Lizzy: *... It's not that it's important, it's just who I am, but yes I guess that sometimes I like people to know that I'm not white.*
>
> Matthew: … *and how do you do that? I mean for the people who can't tell, how do you let them know?*
>
> Lizzy: *Well, I don't know really, just the things I say, the way I say them, and I might do things like tell a joke or suck my teeth or something like that.*

(Recorded in follow-up interview
later transcribed)

Lizzy clearly and consciously projects an image of herself as a worker that differs from that which the call centre management seek to communicate. Against the growing attempt by the Call Centre to regulate the projection of identity during the customer interaction, Lizzy's confession reveals an active attempt to reinsert her own identity, or an identity that she chooses to project, into the customer interaction. A clear example of concrete semi-resistance, but also conditioned and made possible by the abstract ontological category of resistance thus demonstrating a divergent subjectivity on behalf of the CSRs and also the (still) enduring fissure between Capital and Labour. Lizzy's strategies of inserting her chosen identities into the productive process are quite clearly resistant in both epistemological and ontological realms. Empirically the conscious drawing attention to the ethnicity of the CSRs promotes an identity beyond the standard script defined by the Call Centre management team. Furthermore the behaviour is the manifestation of the creativity and authenticity of Labour power to be both productive and non-productive at an ontologically deeper level.

Significantly, despite the pathological desire the call centre management had to eliminate possible non-productive behaviour, the shift in the mode of production, requiring greater deployment of communicative and emotional Labour, in order to maintain profitable production means that the Call Centre Management was forced to attempt to develop greater and deeper spans of control and this ultimately led to the management of CSR identity. Empirically, this was manifest in attempts to actively regulate the outward appearance of CSRs' identities through their appearance and deportment, however despite the extension of structural and cultural control, deployment of managerial discourses and the attempt to realign the interests of CSRs and management, the dialectical antagonism between the two continued to be reproduced and spawned new and creative expressions in the form of differential subjectivities.

Appendix I. Ethnographic Theory Generation



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Appendix II. Characterising research into workplace resistance

	Nature of Research	*Methods Employed*	*Examples*
Traditional Studies of Resistance	Identification of specific forms of resistant practices followed by attempts to *explain* the recalcitrant worker	Plant Ethnography, Longitudinal Studies, Participant Observation	Beynon (1975) Edwards (1979) Burawoy (1979)
Call Centre Resistance	Identification of *capacity* for resistance in the face of surveillance apparatus	Interviews, Observation, Literature Reviews	Fernie & Metcalf (1998) Taylor & Bain (1999) Callaghan & Thompson (2001)

Appendix III. Transcript of an email from a team leader regarding internal reorganisation

Forwarded from Tina

See your not going anywhere you buggers!

Jules x

--Original Message—

From Call Centre Manager
To Team Leaders

From effect immediately there will be no more transfer s between teams within the call centres and all applications to move within the company will be rejected. This is due to staff shortage and the recent contract expansion.

Thanks

Andrea

Appendix IV. Call Centre Policies

- Any use of e-mail or Internet facilities for non-business purposes will result in disciplinary action, which could lead to dismissal.
- PCs and desk areas within the Service Centre are CallCentreCo. property, which must not be personalised in any way. The CallCentreCo. standard screen saver should be on all PCs within the centre. Please remove all non-standard software upon the advice from the infrastructure manager.
- Service centre staff, unless designed 2nd line support, is not to change the configuration of any of the Service Centre PCs in any way without the permission of the Service Centre Management team.
- Staff will not be granted authorisation to MIS (central computer services) services unless for an account specific business requirement, which must be authorised by Service Centre Management
- A locker will be allocated to you and all personal belongings must be locked away for your own security purposes. Coats must be hung in the wardrobes provided and not left on the back of chairs.
- There should be no visible newspapers, magazines or books that are not business related around the desk area in the Service Centre. Desk staff should not be reading these during working hours at their desks.
- Staff must report sickness at least 1-2 hours before they are due to commence work.
- All holidays must be authorised by your team leader and wherever possible a minimum of 10 workings days notice given. NO (emphasis original) holidays may be taken over to the following year.
- Timekeeping – it is essential that you are punctual and ready to work promptly. Poor timekeeping puts pressure on others, can lead to us not meeting our SLAs[1] and is totally unsatisfactory.
- Staff are not permitted to consume at their desk any item other than crisps, biscuits or sweets and these only when there are not visitors to the centre. In the event that we have client visitors in Aston, your Team Leaders will advise you not to consume ANY (emphasis original) items at your desk. There is a breakaway area at the end of the service centre where food items can be consumed during your authorised breaks. You must clear away all rubbish cups etc.
- All mobile phones must remain power off and should be locked away in personal lockers. They are not permitted on the service desks. The only exception to this is client-supplied phones and mobiles for support purposes, which must be agreed by Service Centre Management.
- All members of staff must inform the Service Centre Management of any visitors that are due to visit the centre. We are contractually obliged to have a high level of security and confidentiality of all clients. A review of access will be taking place. The centre is not a social meeting point.

Appendix V. Depiction of team electronic moving message sign

Queued	0	Total	148
Agt Free	0	G.O.S %	100